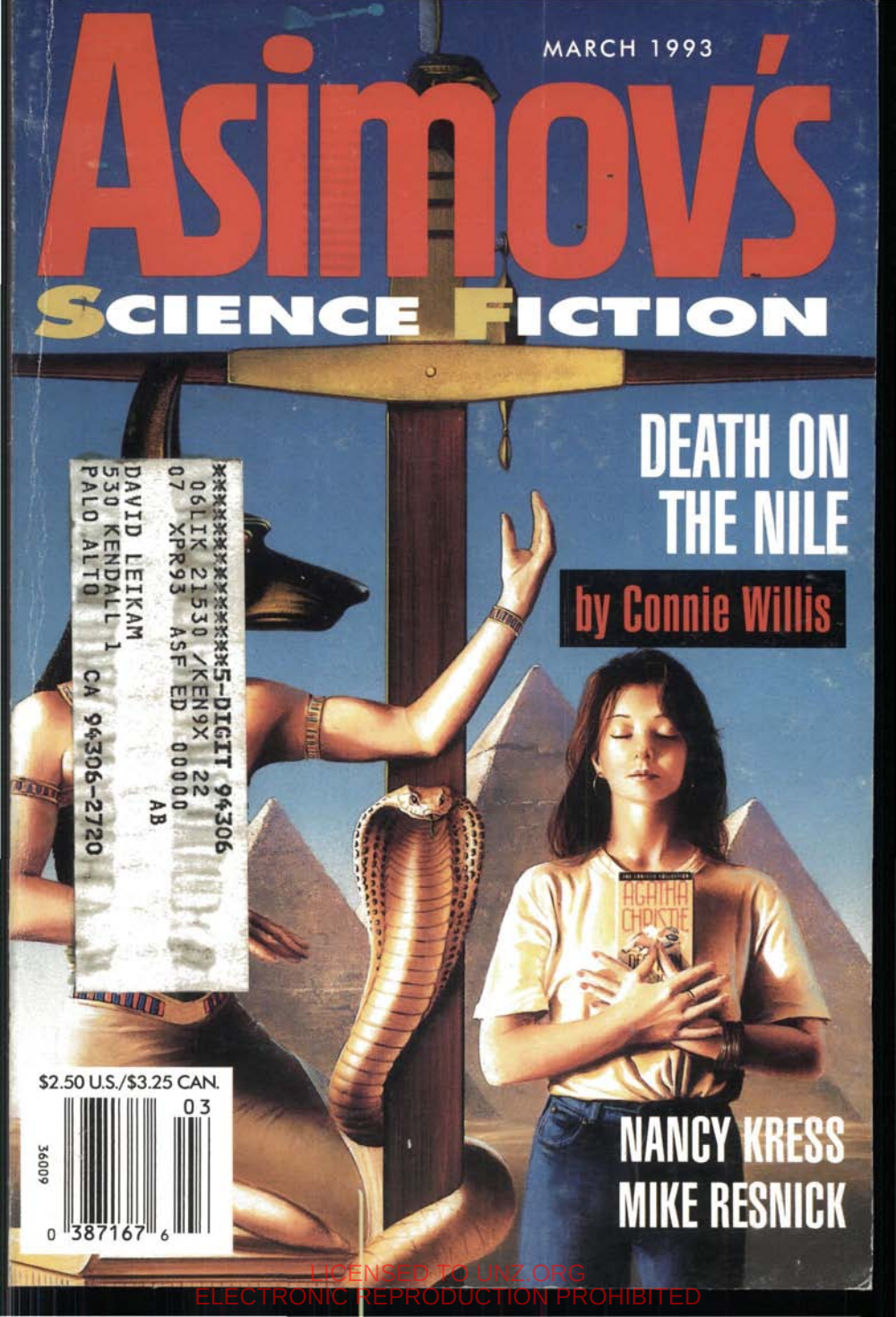

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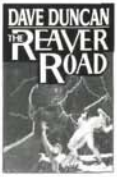

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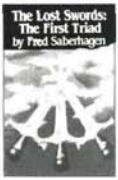

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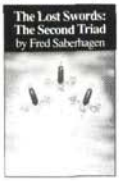

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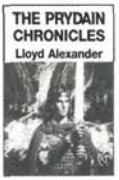

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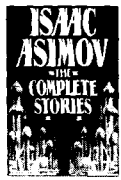

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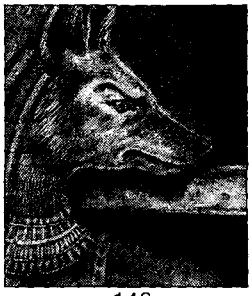

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won nineteen Hugos and nineteen Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eight Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1992 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977–1992)
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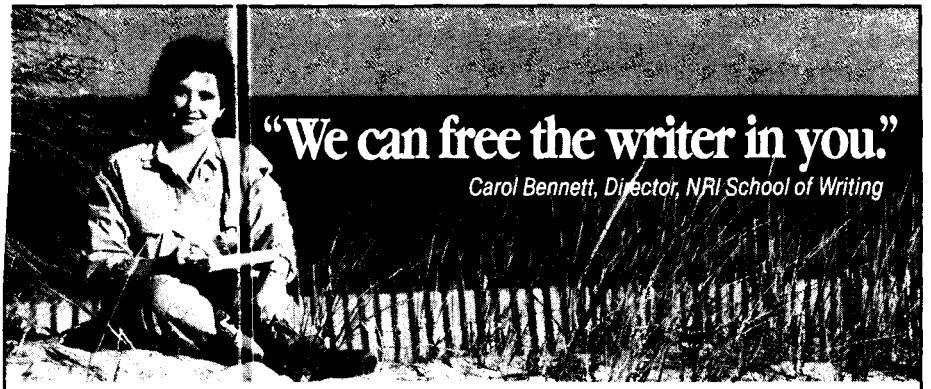

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Dozois:

My father called me with the news that Isaac Asimov was dead. I was half asleep when the phone rang, but I knew it was bad news. My heart sank into the pit of my stomach and beat so hard I could feel my chest moving. I don't know how I knew it was bad news. I simply knew.

My wife answered the phone. I can still remember her end of the conversation as if it were etched on the surface of my brain. I caught only half the meaning, hearing only one side, but I heard an, "Oh my God," and an, "I'll wake him up so you can tell him right away." With positive confirmation that it *was* bad news, fear gripped my body with an iron hand: panic and a feeling of helplessness washed over me like waves crashing into a beach. I was afraid my father had died; my worst and darkest fear.

I must admit, I was more than a little relieved to hear my father's gruff, raspy, old voice on the end of the line. "Isaac Asimov died early this morning," he said quietly. His words struck at my heart like a hammer on an anvil. My relief turned to sadness, not the utter panic and fear felt when I thought my father had passed away, but a deep sadness. We were both silent for a moment, and then we cried. We didn't cry the great huge whooping sobs of depression, but the sad slow tears that accompany a feeling of loss. A new void had opened in our lives. It was a void that *had* been filled by the ever-present anticipation of Dr. Asimov's next piece of nonfiction, short story, or novel.

That's gone from my life now. It's also gone from my father's life, as well as from the lives of millions of other people who enjoyed his writing. I wonder, I really wonder if we will realize, within our life times, what a giant walked among us? Or will we have to wait years, perhaps until we are all dead, for him to get the real recognition he deserves? I'm *not* talking about awards. Everyone knows he was blessed with more of those than most of us poor writers will ever see. I *am* talking about a general understanding, an agreement, that he was the very best science fiction writer, ever. Perhaps, dare I say, one of the best writers of any genre or even mainstream fiction?

I've read a lot about Dr. Asimov lately, mostly good, but some not so good. I've read that he was "merely a popularizer" of science, that his stories were all idea and no character. I have only one thing to say in Dr. Asimov's favor. It's one simple thing yet it says *every-*

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thing that ever needs to be said about his writing. I've never—ever—read a single thing, fiction or non-fiction, that he's written, that I've been able to put down. The only reason I've ever stopped reading one of his novels, only to begin reading it again the next day, at the crack of dawn, is that I've fallen asleep and dropped the book from my tired hands, letting it fall to the ground with a thud and a ruffle of pages. My wife has grown quite accustomed to picking up Dr. Asimov's books from the floor and putting me to bed. When I begin one of his books or short stories, I'm riveted to it. I simply can't read the words fast enough. There's always something new on each page that leads me forward, that draws me into the rest of the book or story.

Dr. Isaac Asimov was a genius, pure and simple. He *was* the best science fiction writer that has ever put word to page. Anyone that attempts to paint him as anything less is foolish, and will diminish him or herself greatly in the eyes of thousands, millions of readers all over the world.

I only hope, that one day, I can be as "bad" at characterization as he was. And I think that if I try, with every ounce of my being, I might get there. I've already got a head start: I love Gilbert and Sullivan. Now that he is gone, I think I'll try even harder.

I never knew him. I never met him. I never got a chance to thank him for writing all those wonderful stories. He never knew what an effect he had on my young mind. On the off chance that he can still hear me, let me thank him now.

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Thank you Dr. Asimov. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you for awakening the dreamer that lay waiting inside me, that lay waiting for your special story telling magic to bring it to life. I will do you credit someday. I promise.

Louis E. Sequin
Detroit, MI

Dear Mr. Dozois and Ms. Williams,

Several months have gone by since Dr. Asimov passed away. It was only after I received the September 1992 issue of your magazine did I finally know that he was gone. The editorial page for that issue was missing one thing: his picture.

I'm sure you've received many letters concerning Dr. Asimov since then and it is not my intention to repeat what has already been said about him. I would just like to say that his death did not go unnoticed here in Singapore. The local newspaper gave a full page to his obituary, and several of my friends have also expressed shock and grief over his death.

I did not have the pleasure of meeting him personally. But I was glad to have read his books, and to have two of my previous letters answered in your magazine's letters column. His thoughts will surely live on through his works and through your magazine.

Soh Kam Yung
Singapore

P.S. My thanks also to Mr. Harlan Ellison. His book, *Angry Candy* (especially the introductory essay), helped me to accept Dr. Asimov's death.

Dear Editor,

I must be a bit behind in my reading, for I have just seen Lou Judson's letter appearing in the April 1992 issue of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine. Your suggestion that he send his collection of back issues to Eastern Europe is an excellent one.

For about two years, the Society has operated a shoestring program centering on donating copies of the Tolkien works to libraries, groups, and individuals in the former Warsaw Pact nations. As a result, we are in touch with several organizations, clubs, and a few libraries, most of whom were referred to us (frequently by the U.S. Embassy) with reference to Tolkien. However, it is also clear that interest by most of these bodies is not limited to Tolkien exclusively.

I have written to Mr. Judson, suggesting groups in Poland, Romania, and Russia who would appreciate his collection. If other readers have materials to donate, we would be pleased to assist in matching donors with suitable groups and libraries in Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and even in a few other areas, like Iran, where literature and publications may have been restricted.

Thanks for your generous suggestion. The exchange of literature is far more likely to produce a good cultural relationship than all the military posturing of the past fifty years or so.

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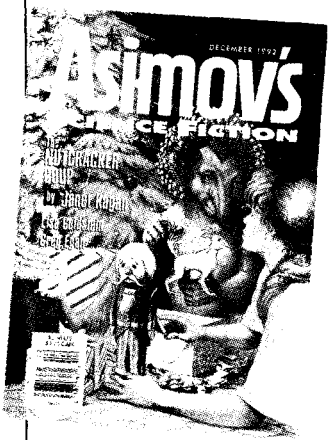

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Dear Gardner Dozois
or Sheila Williams,

With the exception of Tony Daniel's novella, every story in your September issue is tied to man's attempts to keep himself entertained. Kayaking, going on safari, music, basketball, Elvis—even Daniel's crime story contains musings on the writing process (time–travel stories, poems).

Was this a deliberate "theme" issue, or is entertainment now SF's background of choice?

Yours,

Barbara Paul
Pittsburgh, PA

Dear Editor,

Most everyone knows that FTL travel is almost certainly impossible (IA thought so), but there are a few other scientific facts that place limits on credibility, too, such as the three laws of thermodynamics. For example, in Tony Daniel's excellent "Death of Reason" (Sept 1992), we read: "The carton of milk quickly warmed in my hand as the heatpumping nano activated and cooled the insides." I know that nanotech will be able to do almost anything, but . . .

Supposing it was a pint *container* (about half a liter) and that it cooled from, say, 24°C to 4°C, the nanos would have to pump at a rate of about 1400 watts (if "quickly" is 30 seconds), or 2800 watts (15 sec)—and that assumes 100 per cent efficiency, which is impossible (Second Law). To put it another way, it would take a 100 watt bulb 6 or 7 minutes to *warm* the milk by 20°C. Now, one of the first things a physical chemist

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wants to know about any process is "where does the energy come from?" Generally, it takes a lot of mass to story energy safely (i.e., at low temperatures), and that isn't likely to change much. Did Andy drink a sludge of expended energy-storing nanos? (If they weren't mixed with the milk, then you have thermal conductivity problems, too.) Does the carton come with a big battery on the bottom? Doesn't this society worry about solid waste disposal?

Just wanted you to know how petty some of your readers can be. (I loved the story, in spite of all!)
Yours very truly,

Jess Schilling
Huntington, PA

Dear Sheila Williams,

My heartfelt sympathies to all of you who have worked with "The Pillar of Hercules of Science Fiction."

When a writer can think up such a wonderfully integrated plot, new idea, and create a short story that is an entirety in both knowledge of a game, understanding of the people who play it, and a fully organized characterization, I *must* send in my affection and acknowledge my pleasure in reading it, and compliment the author's expertise. As a short story, I don't think I have read anything as complete. More Power to, and a lot more accolades for Jonathan Lethem for the story "Vanilla Dunk." Such a good understanding of the players of the game, and a good story of interracial feelings, as well as a nice little twist of scientific possibilities. I'll be looking for more from him.

The loss the entire scientific world will feel by the lack of Isaac Asimov's presence, is going to be astounding, but I expect that fans of the magazine that bears his name will continue to read it for many, many years to come, and that it will be considered a tribute to the Greatness of his aura.
Yours,

Caroline LC. Goldsmith
Hicksville, NY

FROM: A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

CONTRACTIONS

I didn't, I wouldn't, I daren't and can't
Do what you ask me. It's not mine to grant.
To take out a vowel where a vowel ought to be?
You'll have to ask someone braver than me.

—Tom Disch

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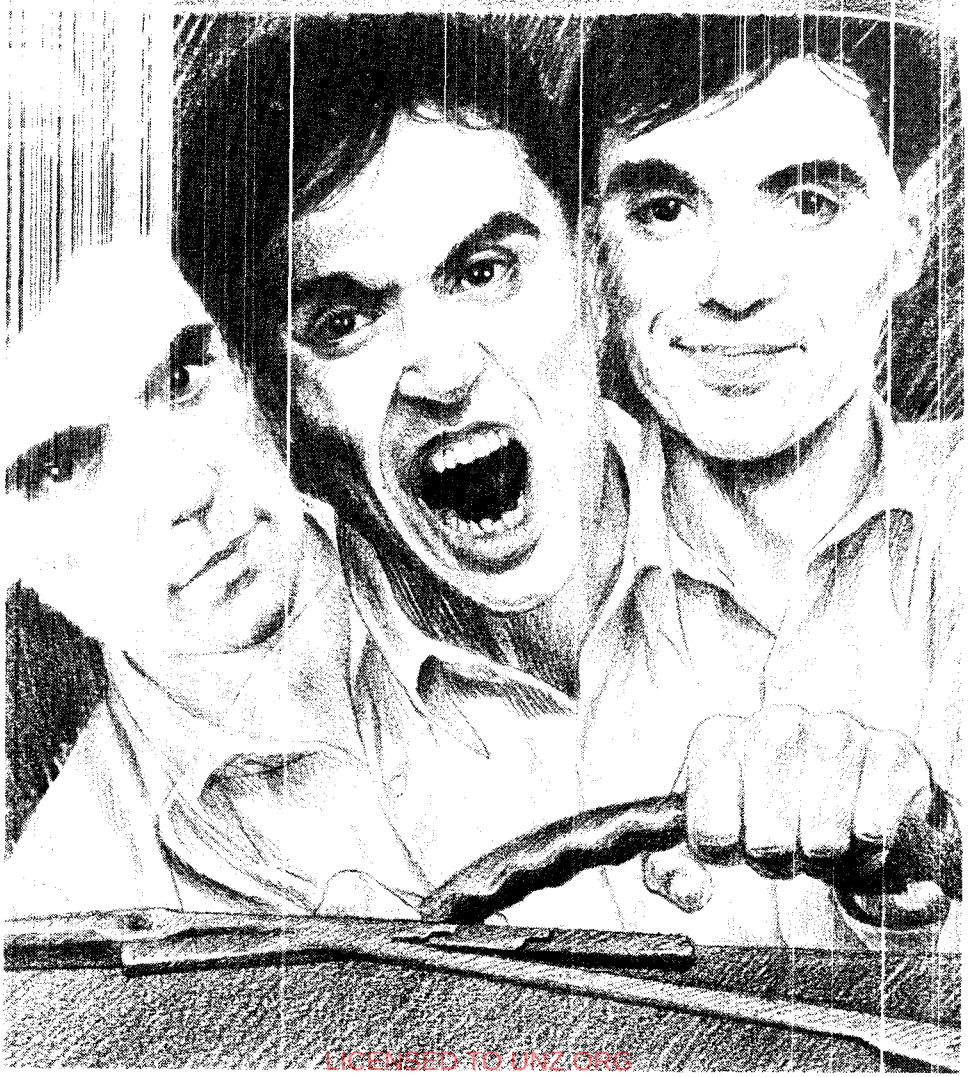
RTIN ON A WEDNESDAY

Nancy Kress

uthor's brilliant novella "Beggars in Spain" (April 1991), the Hugo, the Nebula, and our own annual Readers' Another novella by Ms. Kress, "And Wild for to Hold" (July 991), was also a finalist for last year's Hugo Award.

art: Laurie Harden



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Martin woke in a wide white bed beside a sleeping brunette in a lacy white nightgown. Behind pale curtains, traffic hummed. He had never seen the room or the woman before.

He sat up slowly, waiting for the pain. When it didn't come, he put a trembling hand on the woman's shoulder. She stirred but didn't waken, and at the slight movement he pulled his hand back and stared at it. His fingers were pink and strong. His wedding ring was gone.

The bedroom was entirely white: walls, woodwork, curtains, bedclothes. Subtle lacy designs wove through the bedspread. Her room, then. But through the open closet door he could see a full wardrobe of male clothes, workshirts and two suits and his good-luck battered trenchcoat.

Elizabeth had said she was going to give the trenchcoat to the Salvation Army. Standing in his hospital room, rare tears streaming over her chiseled cheekbones, "*You'll never wear it again I can't stand it Martin I can't . . .*"

"God, look at the time!" said the brunette. "I'm late, let me in the shower first, will you, John?" She had a wheedling voice and a dazzling smile. She kissed him on the ear, stripped the nightgown over her head, and whirled naked into the bathroom, closing the door jauntily. She had the sweetest ass he'd ever seen.

Carefully Martin climbed out of bed. There was no pain. His wallet lay on the dresser—his, given to him by his mother two years ago for Christmas, the tan calfskin scuffed from rubbing against his keyring in his pocket. Inside was a driver's license with his picture and the name JOHN L. JENKINS, 164 Stacey Drive Apartment C. Jenkins had a MasterCard and sixty-five dollars. Folded with the bills was a note: *Remember milk! I love you. Connie.*

Martin gripped the edge of the dresser and hung on till the dizziness passed.

The suit, stiff blue polyester, fit him. He dressed frantically, like a man dying. But, then, he *was*. He, Martin Oliver, whose last remission had ended months ago, and whose wife Elizabeth had finally broken after a year of brisk and painful bravery, sobbing into his trenchcoat in a room where nothing, by design, was white.

The brunette was singing in the shower, indistinct words in a strong contralto. Martin bolted from the bedroom, through a boxy, alien living room to the front door. But after he'd yanked it open, he stumbled back to the tiny kitchenette and opened the refrigerator. Between a pitcher of orange juice and the remains of a pot roast sat an unopened half-gallon of milk.

There were car keys in the pocket of his trenchcoat. In the shabby parking lot beside 164 Stacey Drive his old Mercedes was parked under a bare maple, between a Ford Escort and a Toyota Tercel. Martin scraped

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the windshield free of frost. "Hey, John!" called a teenage boy jogging past. Martin made his arm lift in a wave. The boy's bare legs under lycra shorts scissored the cold air.

He drove slowly, afraid to risk anything. Stacey Drive ended at Dewey, a major thoroughfare he recognized. Most of the traffic headed toward the city. Martin drove the other way; at the long light just before the expressway ramp he pulled the registration from the glove compartment. It read, '81 MERC 4-DR BLUE JOHN L. JENKINS.

In Allenham the houses sat on acre lots, surrounded by trees. Schoolbuses clogged the winding streets, stopping and starting, flashing red lights. Martin watched Camilla's best friend, Emily Mastro, drag her plaid bookbag aboard Bus 62. He craned his neck peering into the bus windows but all he could see was indeterminate motion, as if the children were underwater. Camilla's lunchbag sat incongruously in the middle of his driveway. He picked it up on his way to the front door, feeling slippery waxed brown paper under his fingers, smelling peanut butter and jelly. He gazed for a long minute at the house, composed of massive, flat-roofed rectangles in rough-textured wood and brick.

Elizabeth answered the door in a red bathrobe he'd never seen before, her short blonde hair tousled. Her eyes widened. "Martin! Oh, God, Martin, it's not Wednesday. . . ." Then she saw Camilla's lunchbag and her face crumpled. "Did she see you?"

He shook his head numbly. Elizabeth said uncertainly, "You *are* Martin, right? Not . . . Cody?"

"Cody?" He could barely get the words out. "Who the hell is Cody?"

"It's not *Wednesday*," Elizabeth said. "Call Dr. Hasselbach, the number's in your wallet. God, I'm sorry, but you have to understand I can't . . . I can't risk. . . ."

"Wait! Elizabeth!" Martin yelled. But she had already closed the door. On the other side, a deadbolt slid into place.

For the first time, he saw that the tall, recessed windows on his house were barred.

Dr. Hasselbach himself met Martin in the lobby of the Clinton Medical Group, a glossy atrium full of *ficus benjamina*. The atrium was framed by narrow columns and patterned metal screens. The moment Martin laid eyes on Hasselbach he recognized him. It was an odd sensation, a part of his mind turning inside out like a sock. Hasselbach was small and balding. He laid a hand on Martin's arm, an intimate gesture that unnerved Martin with its lack of context.

"Cody?"

"No. Martin."

The hand remained on Martin's arm. Martin realized—or remembered,

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or guessed—that Hasselbach was a psychiatrist. He followed Hasselbach into his office.

"You're understandably confused, Martin," Hasselbach said. The words were so inadequate that Martin fought an insane desire to laugh.

"I'm dying. Of cancer. *Was* dying. Was almost dead. . . ." Hasselbach listened intently, a small man behind a large desk. Something about that intensity angered Martin. "What the hell is going on here, Doctor? I want some answers!"

"Easy, Martin. Easy. If you get too angry, Cody will come out."

"Cody? *Doctor*—"

"Take a deep breath. Just give yourself a minute." Hasselbach ran his fingers through his hair, which barely existed. Martin looked away, around the room. Pilasters without emblature, symmetrical arched windows in glossy white: Neo-Formalist. Something moved inside, like the smooth drop of a deadbolt into its appointed place. *I am an architect.*

Am? Was?

"Easy, Martin. You can't allow yourself to get angry. Anger triggers Cody. He's the personality we had to implant in order to induce the multiple-personality syndrome." Hasselbach again ran his fingers through his non-existent hair. Sweat flecked the grainy skin around his nose. "How to start? But you already know all this, when you're . . . when you're not . . . MP usually only develops in severely abused children, as a defense against parents who actually torture them. Usually the kids repress all their rage, but it inevitably concentrates itself in one violent personality, out of many others. Can't you remember any of this, Martin?"

"No!" Martin said. Something inside was slipping, but not like a deadbolt. The floor tilted and there was screaming and the sharp smell of gasoline. Something flew through the air, something small and deadly. Martin was on his feet, his fists clenched at his side. In the left one was a four-inch blade. Hasselbach shrank even smaller behind his desk as the door burst open and two security guards barreled through. Martin turned to them, dazed. The knife fell from his open palm to the floor.

"Wait!" Hasselbach hollered, a remarkably strong yell for such a little man. Martin suddenly flashed on him cheering for the Packers. The guards stopped, confused.

"Martin?" Hasselbach said.

"Yes," Martin gasped. His chest pounded. He could still smell gasoline. It had soaked through his jeans, his sneakers, and the thing flying through the air had been a match. . . . How did he know that Hasselbach was a Green Bay fan?

"Thank you, this is under control," Hasselbach told the guards, who left without liking it. Hasselbach stayed behind his desk.

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Martin stared at the doctor. Over Hasselbach's shoulder, through the arched window, winter sunlight spilled over a terraced piazza with broad, shallow steps. People hurried up the steps, late for work—real people, who knew where they were going. The gasoline smell faded. In its place Martin saw the note in his wallet: *Remember milk! I love you. Connie.*

"I install carpets," he said suddenly. "I mean . . . John Jenkins does."

Hasselbach leaned forward. "Yes. The way you did when you were working your way through college. What else do you know about Jenkins?"

"Nothing," Martin said flatly. "You deliberately implanted a violent personality in me? How? *Why*?"

"Through deep hypnosis under radically experimental drugs. In order to induce your mind to form the primary alternate personality. John Jenkins." Hasselbach no longer seemed afraid. Apparently Martin, as himself, was not very scary. Except to himself.

Hasselbach said beseechingly, "Try to understand the research design. For at least twenty years, clinical practice documented the weird differences that can exist between different personalities in a multiple. *Physical* differences. One might be allergic to citrus juice, and another can drink six gallons of the stuff without a reaction. One might be left-handed, one right—"

The knife had dropped from his left hand. Martin fumbled his pocket for his cigarettes with his right. They weren't there.

"—one might smoke and one not," finished Hasselbach.

Suddenly Martin saw it. "And one have cancer and one not."

Hasselbach gazed at him with compassion. "Yes. At first researchers couldn't believe it, but it's been documented for well over a decade. If a personality without a carcinoma dominates, the tumor shrinks. It can even disappear, provided the healthy personality stays both dominant *and* unaware of the sick one."

"John Jenkins."

"Yes."

"And I have . . ." He meant to say, *And as Jenkins I have another job and another apartment and another wife or lover or whatever the hell she is and also a murderous implanted personality that made Elizabeth bar her windows because I did something I can't even remember* . . . but the words wouldn't come. For a moment the pounding in his head started again and something flickered at the edge of his vision, something small flying through the air. . . . Martin breathed deeply and put his head between his knees. He felt, rather than saw, Hasselbach reach under the desk for the security button. But Cody retreated.

"There's another important thing you must remember, Martin," Hasselbach said gently. "You chose this. You and Elizabeth."

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The blow smashed into her skull.
For the briefest of moments, she regained consciousness. It might have been a split second after the attack, or two hours later, she could not say. But she saw them, there was no doubt of that. She saw the feet, the two red metallic feet, not thirty centimeters from her face...
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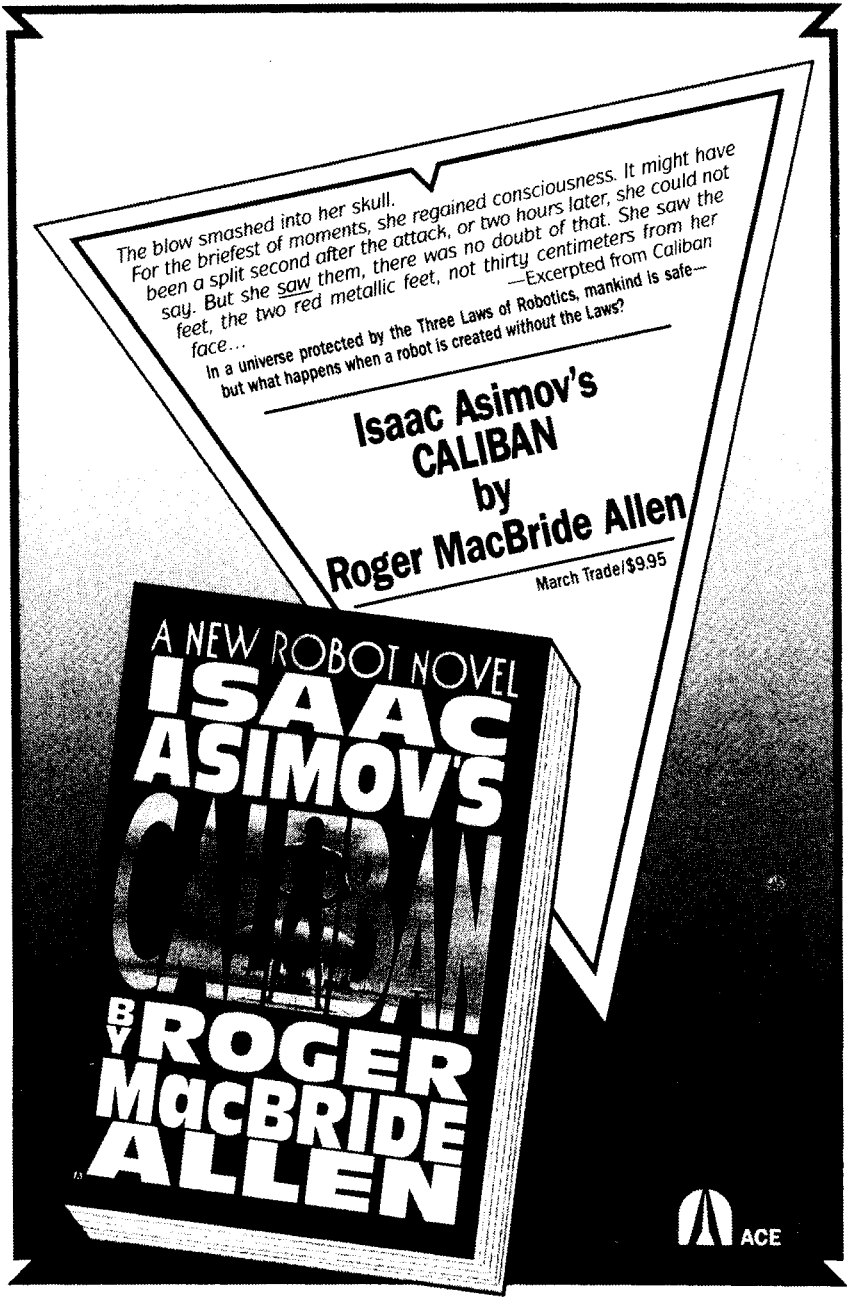

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"I *chose* it? Then why the fuck can't I remember it?"

Hasselbach looked down, at the shining surface of his desk, as glossy and bright as the *ficus* leaves in the Neo-Formalist atrium. For the first time, Martin realized that the *ficus* trees had been artificial.

"You will, Martin. During your regular emergences. This emergence of the Martin personality is unscheduled, and I admit it's worrisome. I suspect it's an incomplete emergence. We don't know for sure, this is all experimental—But you will remember that you chose this way, when you're fully Martin again, which has to be limited in duration to prevent the regrowth of the tumor. But you are still yourself. The hypnotic implant assures that you will remember your core life."

He looked at Martin. "For six hours every Wednesday."

He drove carefully, trying not to see the dashboard of a Ford truck that sometimes blurred the dashboard of the Mercedes, trying to see nothing that wasn't solidly in front of him. At The Bookshelf he walked steadily to the arts section. There weren't many books on architecture: *Classic Country Houses*, by Lawrence Grow. *House*, by Tracy Kidder. *Why Buildings Stand Up*, by Mario Salvadori. *Designing The Future: A Layman's Guide To Twentieth-Century Architecture*, by Martin Oliver. He opened it to the first page:

For Elizabeth—as what is not?

His picture was on the inside back flap, the face already too thin, already lengthened by pain. *Martin Oliver, architect with the respected firm of Olson & Vendretti, explores and explains the movements that have made our cities look the way they do. In clear, sparkling prose anyone can understand, he—*

He bought the book, took it to the closest restaurant, and tried to read. Every sentence meant something important—controversies and innovations, debates and departures—but none of it meant anything important to him. Finally, when whatever it was he'd ordered was stone cold, the waitress began giving him pointed looks. Martin paid the bill with John Jenkins' money and left.

At Connie's apartment he stood in the white lace bedroom before a full-length mirror and took off all his clothes. He felt tired, bone-aching exhausted. His head hurt. But even through the weariness and headache, he looked healthy and fit. A forty-year-old man who watched his weight, kept in shape. A body firm and flushed with life.

He pressed both hands over his abdomen, where the tumor had been. *Pancreatic cancer. Inoperable. We're so sorry, Mr. Oliver. . . .*

"Oh!" Connie said.

Martin saw her in the mirror, standing in the doorway, her arms full of books. A word appeared in his mind, stark and angular as an

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International façade: *schoolteacher*. She taught the fourth grade. She got home at three-thirty.

Connie smiled. "What a nice surprise. Did you guys finish up early today? Stan pushing hard again? Ummmm . . ." She tossed the books on the bed and slid her arms around him from behind.

Martin saw himself in the mirror. Four hands, two large ones dangling at his side and two smaller ones fondling his penis. It stiffened and rose. The small hands wore no rings.

"Ummm . . ." Connie purred again, and turned him around. Her head just reached his chin. Her dark hair was glossy, untouched by gray, and when she raised her face to kiss him he saw that the skin around her eyes glowed with freshness.

"I like it when you come home early, John." She unbuttoned her blouse. Her breasts were full and round, with erect nipples so pink they might have been little tongues, completely different from Elizabeth's dimpled chocolate aureoles. Martin felt his mouth fill with water and desperately he tried to picture Elizabeth, Elizabeth his wife. . . .

"Come here, John," Connie said. "Or better yet, I'll go *there*." She knelt, and Martin knew there was no image anywhere in his multiple mind that was going to keep him from John Jenkins' lover. His own lover. Whoever.

But later, afterward, when they lay curled together in the white-lace bed, Martin turned his face away from her. It had been a long time since he had felt shame. "Connie," he said, and his voice came out in a croak.

She didn't seem to notice. She felt around among the bedclothes under her ass. "What's this? A book? Did you just get it today?"

He made himself look at her eyes. They were a clear light gray, lit with a soft glow. He couldn't answer.

"I didn't know you were interested in architecture," she said. "Isn't it funny the things you can still learn about a person even after six whole months of living together?"

"I live for these Wednesdays," Elizabeth said. She leaned toward him across the kitchen table. Her streaked blonde bangs fell over her eyes, and the sleeve of her cotton blouse brushed across the butter. Gently Martin moved the butter dish. "The rest of the week I go through the motions, but there's always a part of me counting off the hours until Wednesday. Even when I hate myself for doing it."

"I know," Martin said.

"You *don't* know, Martin. How can you know? For six days and eighteen hours of every week, you don't even remember I exist."

Martin ran his hands over his face, pulling at the skin of his cheeks.

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He felt tired, and slightly nauseous, and very horny, a disturbing combination. Something tugged at his mind, something white—It was gone.

Elizabeth poured them both fresh coffee. This was the Wednesday ritual—talk first, then bed, then a few precious hours with Camilla after she came home from school. Most of the talking part of the ritual centered on Elizabeth's feelings. Martin didn't mind. She was entitled. For thirteen years he had arrived at his own feelings through discussing Elizabeth's. This particular vocabulary he took from her. And unlike many women, Elizabeth was fair. If he listened sincerely to an hour of emotion, she was satisfied and turned loving. She had never, even in less bizarre circumstances, taken more than was her due.

Martin couldn't imagine how to define what was her due in these circumstances.

"It's not as if I don't love you still," Elizabeth said. "I *do*. That's the problem. I can't seem to let you go."

"I don't want you to let go," Martin said. The idea made his chest roil. Life without Elizabeth? Coming to himself—that was the way he thought of it each Wednesday, "coming to himself"—without seeing Elizabeth, touching Elizabeth, talking to Elizabeth. . . . He breathed deeply. There could never be anybody for him but Elizabeth. There never had been, not since the first day he'd seen her striding across campus with her confident walk that made him think she could take on the whole world.

"Oh, Martin, I do love you!" She jumped up from her chair and came around the table to take him in her arms. Her breasts pushed against his face. The talking part of the visit was over.

She was greedy in bed, rocking hard against him, calling out noisily. He had always liked that. It was part of her fierceness, her unabashed competence. She smelled strongly, too, a spicy smell he had never smelled on any other woman and that always seemed to him the very essence of lust. Afterward, the fierceness turned tender and the spicy smell died slowly away. Curled next to his wife spoon-fashion, his body fitting around hers with unthinking ease, Martin felt grace descend on him, unexpected and sharp as pain. They still had Wednesdays. As long as they had Wednesdays, this weird life they had designed was worth it. He held Elizabeth, and was grateful when she held him back, silent.

It was snowing hard. John Jenkins raised his head from the Bigelow "President's Choice" he and Stan were aligning in a Mrs. Crandall's ostentatious living room and saw the snow outside the windows. Something about the windows, set off by a pointless and overly elaborate architrave, made him pause. On the street, car brakes screeched.

Stan said, "So then the guy leaves the hooker and goes back to the

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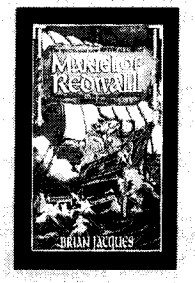

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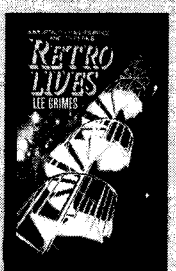

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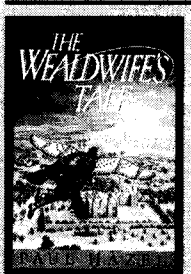

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bar, picks up the redhead, and the three of them go at it for at least twenty minutes. It was a great movie. Jenkins, you listening?"

Martin looked, dazed, at the hammer in his hand. The handle had a deep nick on the left side. He had never seen it before.

"Hey! Don't slow down now, soupbrain! We're almost done!"

Stan. Yes. Stan. How did he know that? How did he know this pseudo-Gothic abomination was Mrs. Crandall's living room?

"Hey, John, you all right?"

"What day is it?" Martin said.

"Day? It's Tuesday, dickhead! Why're you—"

"You finish up. I'm leaving."

"You can't just—Paul isn't going to like this!"

There were two vehicles in the drive, Martin's old Mercedes and a van stenciled FLYING CARPETS/THE BEST VALUE AT THE BEST PRICE! The unseasonal snow, huge wet flakes, touched down on fully bloomed beds of daffodils and tulips and melted instantly.

Martin drove the Mercedes toward the city. He wanted to see Elizabeth, but he was afraid she wouldn't let him in. She hadn't let him in before, neither time when it wasn't a Wednesday. One of the times, he thought, he might have become angry. He couldn't remember what had happened after that, or how long ago it had been. It was May now. And tomorrow was Wednesday. He would wait to see Elizabeth until Wednesday.

The minute Martin let himself into the apartment, he knew he'd lied to himself. He hadn't headed into the city because it wasn't Wednesday. Connie stood in white lace panties, garter belt, stockings, and see-through bra in the middle of the living room. Her dark hair hung loose against her shoulders. She held two wineglasses bubbling pink.

"Happy anniversary, darling," she purred in that contralto only she had, sexy as hell but with an innocence under it, as if nothing could go wrong in such a great world. As if nothing ever had. She tossed her hair back over her shoulders and smiled. "You're right on time, John."

Martin walked toward her.

"All right, we gotta have this out, John," Stan said. "You're not keeping up your end of the work. Paul's starting to notice. You're gonna be in deep shit, buddy."

"I know," John said. His head hurt. It was hard to concentrate on what Stan was saying. And he and Connie had had a godawful fight last night, he didn't know what got into her sometimes. She said he'd been distracted ever since their anniversary, different somehow. . . . Treating her as if she weren't there.

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"So what're you gonna do about it?" Stan said. They were in the warehouse, surrounded by rolls of carpet like giant fuzzy diplomas. Stan stood on a half-unrolled remnant of Dupont Xtra Life in Egyptian Blue.

"What?" Martin said. He looked around in bewilderment. Rugs, and an angry, muscled guy glaring at him. . . .

"I said, what're you gonna do about it! Christ, John, get with it!"

"I'm sorry," John said. The headache must be worse than he thought, for a minute he'd almost passed out. He had to concentrate on what Stan was saying, Stan was one of those people who got angry in the presence of weakness or sickness because it embarrassed him. A common reaction . . . *how did he know that?* "I'll do better. I've just been getting these bad headaches."

"Then see a doctor!" Stan snapped. "Or Paul's gonna fire you. That clear through your headache?"

"You rotten bastard, you ever talk to me that way again and I'll cut your heart out," Cody said.

Stan took a step backward. His mouth actually fell open, like in cartoons. Cody thought that was pretty funny, except that he wanted to smash a fist into it. The fucker, giving *him* orders. . . . He seized the front of Stan's T-shirt and almost lifted him off the ground. The T-shirt tore.

"John! What . . . Whatta . . ."

Cody slammed his fist into Stan's solar plexus, then his knee into Stan's soft gut. He could hear the wimp vomiting as Cody left the warehouse.

Jenkins' Mercedes was parked near the fence. Cody tore onto the expressway and gunned the motor. He wanted to score. Fuck, he'd been in so long—months this time, while those two wimps Jenkins and Oliver lived their puking little lives. Although he'd say this much for them, they both had class-A women. Maybe instead of scoring he should look up sweet-assed Connie . . . but, no, she was in school being the cute little teacher. Elizabeth, then—the kid would still be in school. . . .

A ten-wheeler tried to pass him on the right. KLEEN BRITE it said on the side. Cody hit the accelerator and roared forward, angling back in front of the wheeler within inches of its grill. The trucker leaned on the horn. Cody flipped him the finger—arrogant bastard! Cut him off deliberately! Cody slowed down. The trucker tried to pass again, this time on the left.

Cody could feel the rage surge up in him, clean and strong and welcome as red blood. Fucker thought he could butt-fuck Cody! He slammed his foot on the accelerator and started to cut ahead again. The truck speeded up. Cody wrenched the wheel hard to the left and screamed. The screaming went on a long time, and something small flew through the air. It hit his gasoline-soaked jeans and his legs were on fire, his chest and

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belly—"Stop it! Make it stop, Mommy! Please!" But Mommy had thrown the match and the next moment the Mercedes was flipping through the air, Martin's body straining so hard against the seat belt he thought his back would break. By the time he opened his mouth to scream, the Mercedes had hit ground.

"You were lucky," Connie said. "That's what the doctor says. My God, John, you could have been killed!"

Martin looked at her. She had rushed to Emergency from her classroom; chalkdust smeared the shoulder of her dark blue sweater. The chalkdust was no whiter than her face. The doctor, who was not Hasselbach but a Pakistani resident with a name Martin couldn't pronounce, watched them quietly. Connie put her arms around him. She smelled of chalk and perfume and her young body trembled. Martin had thought of calling Elizabeth from Emergency, but it wasn't Wednesday.

"You can go to home now," the doctor intoned musically, "but you must to come back if you have any blurred vision, dizziness, or neck pain."

"Thank you, doctor," Connie said. Reluctantly she released Martin. "Honey, can you walk?"

"Of course I can walk," Martin said. But in the parking lot he suddenly had to lean on her chalky shoulder.

"What is it? Dizziness? Blurred vision? Neck pain? Honey?"

Guilt, he wanted to say. *Fear*. He remembered exactly what had happened on the expressway. He remembered the Kleen-Bright truck, and Stan's bawling him out, and the carpet warehouse. He remembered Cody and John, who were not him, and whom he was not supposed to remember.

"Just tired out," he told Connie, and she supported him all the way to her car.

"You can get dressed now," Hasselbach said. "I'll be right back." He closed the door. The guard had already left.

Martin picked his clothes off a light green leather ottoman that matched the light green silk curtain drawn across the consulting room for modesty. Everything in the room, no matter what it was made of, was light green. A soothing color, he supposed. It took an effort to pull on his jeans and sweater. What defined "modesty" when every corner of him had just been poked and pulled and listened to in the presence of a guard?

Hasselbach had insisted on the guard; he'd been afraid Cody would emerge. Martin could have told him it wouldn't matter. Even Cody was getting too weak to threaten anybody. Although during the entire examination Martin had been aware of Cody, yelling to get out, his rage a pure

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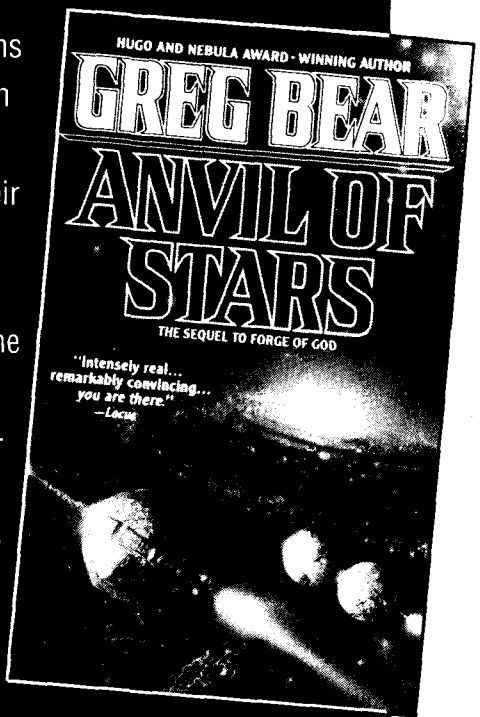
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gush of hatred: *You burned me you bitch you burned me please stop Mommy please make it stop.* It had been an effort not to just let Cody out. Cody at least had some energy. Even if it came from memories of horrors that had never happened.

Martin slumped in the light green chair and put his hand over his face.

Hasselbach came back into the room, holding Elizabeth's elbow. It was Wednesday.

"I think you already know what I'm going to say, Martin," Hasselbach said quietly.

Martin nodded. Elizabeth set her jaw and reached for his hand.

"The tumor is growing. It hasn't yet metastasized, as far as we can tell, but it could do so at any time. The personalities you were given have blurred into each other enough that they no longer have separate bodily attributes."

You must to come back if you have any blurred vision, the Pakistani resident had said in his musical voice. And he had leaned on Connie's chalky shoulder.

"Your fatigue and nausea are of course due to the carcinoma. There will be other symptoms, the same ones as last time. But you do have a choice, Martin. You do have that."

"I don't understand," Elizabeth said. Her fingers tightened on Martin's. "What choice?"

Hasselbach took off his glasses and started to clean them. Martin could see how much he hated this. Failure of his medical experiment. And Martin had been just a goddamn guinea pig. No, that was Cody thinking, Cody raging. . . . But Cody was him, wasn't he? The sperm memories might have been implanted by Hasselbach, but Cody's anger had been fleshed out by Martin's own mind, just as John Jenkins' stolid contentment had been. There was no disowning either of them.

Hasselbach spoke directly to Elizabeth. Easier for Hasselbach than looking at *him*, Martin saw. "We must remove the induced memories we gave Cody. Cody is the key. His severely dysfunctional experiences are what made Martin form the functional personality of John Jenkins. He is also what keeps the personalities in a state of flux. Cody's rage. Cody's instability. Without that, it's possible the John Jenkins personality will become the permanent one. Martin has carefully constructed him, and the mind doesn't like to give up its constructs. If Jenkins became permanent, that definitely might shrink the tumor again. Jenkins doesn't have cancer."

"Permanent?" Elizabeth said. "You mean, Martin wouldn't come out at all? Not even on Wednesday?"

"Or," Hasselbach pressed on, "the Martin personality might take over,

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completely taking back his own mind. But then, of course, he would still have the carcinoma."

Martin said harshly, "Be dying, you mean. If I'm Martin permanently, I die."

"Or, there is a third possibility. We can try starting all over, with another induced dysfunctional personality motivated enough to form a different prime multiple, without cancer. Strength in response to torture."

" 'Dysfunctional'?" Elizabeth cried. " 'Motivated'? What you mean is another tortured little boy who thinks he was burned or beaten or crushed by his mother or father, who grows up to be the kind of person who burns and beats and crushes in return! Do you know what Cody did when he broke into our house eighteen months ago? *Do* you? He raped me! Camilla was home, and she thought it was her father so I didn't dare so much as cry out, and it *was* her father! Only it wasn't. . . ." She was crying now, doubled over in her chair.

Martin reached for her blindly. "Elizabeth . . ."

Instantly she steadied, her hand on his shoulder. Even her eyes looked dry. She was his Elizabeth again, fierce and capable and just. *Multiple personality*, Martin thought, dizzy. *Strength in response to torture.*

"I'm sorry, Martin," Elizabeth said evenly. "That was inexcusable. It wasn't you, and I don't want to make this any harder for you than it already is. I only want what's best for you. I love you, and I want you to live. That's the most important thing I want. You believe that, don't you? Don't you, darling?"

"Yes," Martin said. He did. Inside, John Jenkins groped in the dark and called Connie's name.

Hasselbach said softly, still not looking at Martin, "Don't wait too long to make your decision. There isn't very much time."

"It isn't much of a choice," Elizabeth said.

"No. It isn't."

The crying and pleading were over. Elizabeth sat, smoking, in the dark back booth of a bar near the Medical Center. On the TV suspended over the bar, an ecstatic woman held up a bottle of dish detergent. Elizabeth's free hand moved restlessly over the table. Light from the TV glinted off her wedding ring.

She said, "I think we should—"

"*Wait*," Martin said. He put his hand over hers, to hold it or to hold it still or to cover the ring. She was going too fast. "I think we should wait just a minute."

Her face softened. "Martin, love . . ."

"Just a minute, Connie. Please."

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She didn't change expression. On the TV, a police car screeched to a halt beside an office building, a squat ugly structure like a crate. After a moment, Martin realized.

"You *know*. You know all about Connie, about Connie and me . . . Connie and John Jenkins—"

"Martin—"

"You *know*. You had me followed. On a Wednesday."

Elizabeth's fierceness returned. "I followed you *myself!*" And then a moment later, almost apologetically, "It's all right, Martin. Of course it is. You needed someone, wanted someone—"

She was lying. It was not all right. Nothing was all right.

Martin stood. He blundered toward the door. Elizabeth called after him, but he was already outside, blinking in the sudden sunlight and summer heat, and by the time she paid the check and rushed after him the car had pulled away from the curb. The steering wheel was so cold and heavy in his hands that it was hard to turn. It seemed he could still hear something blowing up on the TV—the police car? The office building?

His life.

He drove without stopping, not even for red lights, until he was out of the city. He kept on driving while the afternoon light faded and the building exploded. Cody tore past a Ford pick-up. John saw the driver's shocked, scared face in the rear view mirror. John pulled over to the side of the road, a shaky stop in a patch of dilapidated daisies, and turned the car around. Martin wrenched the wheel away from him and turned back, a sharp pain like nails behind his eyeballs. Elizabeth knew. All this time she knew he lived with Connie, loved Connie. Six-sevenths of every week. He had done that to her. She knew and he, Martin, did not. About. His. Own. Life.

Martin bellowed and shook his head from side to side. John put his hands over his face and nearly hit a '92 Saturn with a bumper sticker that said SAVE THE PLANET. Cody laughed and rammed the Saturn from behind. It skittered off the road like a water bug and came to rest in a cornfield. John wrenched his head back over his shoulder; the driver was climbing out of the car, unhurt, yelling. Martin drove on.

They were finally stopped by the lake, a scruffy stretch of rocky, weed-choked beach not yet cleaned up for the summer. Someone had dumped a doorless refrigerator at the water's edge and small waves sloshed rhythmically over its rusted shelves. Martin put his head on the steering wheel. Pain burned along his legs, inside his belly.

Get moving, you asshole, you'll die right here you stupid fucker!

Can't move my arm . . . Connie—

She knew. She knew, and I didn't.

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Get moving get moving get moving get moving . . .

Martin screamed. Water sloshed through the refrigerator. Elizabeth and Connie pounded on barred windows. The police car and the office building blew up and burned.

He got out of the car and waded into the wet, toward the dark mists moving over the evening water.

"The tests are negative," Dr. Hasselbach said. He looked pale. Betsy sat straight-backed at the very edge of her chair, like a schoolgirl. Tim smiled at her. *See?* his smile said. *I told you this was silly; I've never been sick a day in my life.*

"All of them?" Betsy said. She lit a cigarette, and the doctor didn't stop her. That seemed a little strange to Tim, but, then, a lot of things seemed just slightly strange. Of course, you had to expect that when you'd nearly drowned fly fishing. Even when the drowning was old news, three months stale. There were bound to be small dislocations of memory for a while. That's what this nice little doctor had said right along.

Even now he didn't like to think what might have happened if that teenage kid hadn't pulled him out. Tim wished the kid had stayed around, though. He wanted to thank him. But Tim couldn't even remember what the kid looked like. Another effect of almost buying it. All he had was a first name.

"Should we repeat the tests? Just in case?" Betsy said. Tim looked at her fondly. That was his Betsy. Thorough as they came. Too serious, though. Now that Tim had this clean bill of health she'd insisted on, he was going to see that Betsy lightened up. Had some fun. Camilla, too. Maybe they could all go to Disneyland next summer.

"I don't think . . . it might be best not to disturb . . ." Hasselbach seemed to be having trouble finding words. Tim jumped in.

"Look, Doc, I'm fine. In fact, I never felt better. Thanks and all, but Betsy and I have to go. I didn't leave my old job to just sit around, you know. A new business needs lots of attention."

Hasselbach and Betsy were staring at him with identical expressions. Tim smiled, took Betsy's cigarette from her hand, and crushed it out. Thirteen years married and he hadn't been able to persuade her to stop smoking. Well, give it time. But right now, he needed to get back to the store. Tim's Decorator Carpets, bought with all their savings, was too big a risk to leave to his inexperienced staff.

But in the parking lot something still nagged at him. "Honey, could we hold dinner for a couple hours tonight? I think I might go ask again at the houses near the lake. I'd really like to find that kid Martin, thank him. Just a couple hours?"

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Betsy lit another cigarette. She opened the car door. "I think maybe you better not. Not tonight."

"Well . . . all right. Another night," Tim said. There was time. There was lots of time.

The store looked great. Tim's new assistant had done a good job with the front display window: bunches of real autumn leaves scattered over carpet rolls in russet, gold, burnt orange. She had ironed the leaves to keep them from withering. Between the carpet rolls sat pumpkins that exactly picked up the undercolor in the Horizon Alhambra shag.

Tim climbed into his new Corvette and headed toward Allenham. He was late again. There was always so much to do. But Betsy would understand. She always did.

Just before the expressway, he stopped and pulled into a Dunkin' Donuts lot. It was getting darker earlier these days, you expected that in the fall, but not *this* dark, not this . . . this . . .

The moment passed. John shook his head to clear it. He pulled out of the lot and whistling, eager, headed the car into the city, toward his and Connie's apartment. He couldn't remember what she'd said they were having for dinner, but he remembered that it was something good, and he was hungry. He'd put in a full day, measuring and cutting and tacking carpet, fitting it carefully into a new house designed by a big downtown architect. Making things fit.

It was Wednesday. ●

FROM: A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

COMPOUND OBJECT PRONOUNS

The gift was wrapped beneath the tree,
The card inscribed, "From Jack and me."

She called him up and asked him why
The card did not say "Jack and I."

"Because all prepositions take
Object pronouns, for heaven's sake!"

When, months later, he called back,
She had already married Jack.

—Tom Disch

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Magnus knew quite well that Rod Gallowglass had stayed on Gramarye because he had fallen in love with Magnus's mother. He knew it not just from his parents' report, but from several others of the older generation who had witnessed it—including Fess. And anything the children had done had been incidental. Until now.

—Excerpted from *A Wizard in Absentia*

Magnus Gallowglass wants to make a name for himself, but it's hard to escape his father's fame as "the High Wizard" at home on Gramarye—so he decides to leave the planet. Accompanied by his robot companion Herkimer, Magnus sets a course for adventure...and creates a legend of his own.

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ACE

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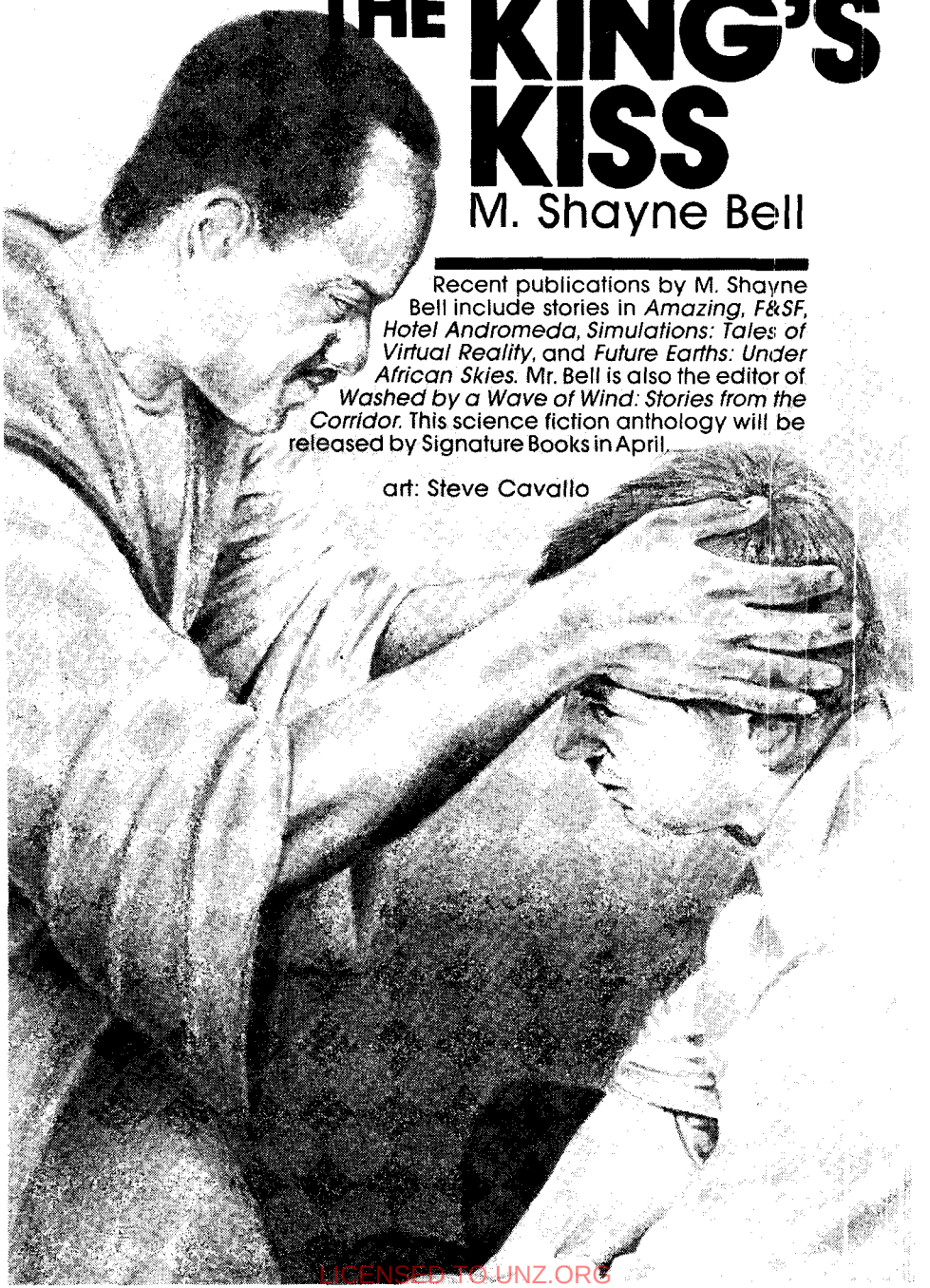
THE KING'S KISS

M. Shayne Bell

Recent publications by M. Shayne Bell include stories in *Amazing*, *F&SF*, *Hotel Andromeda*, *Simulations: Tales of Virtual Reality*, and *Future Earths: Under African Skies*. Mr. Bell is also the editor of *Washed by a Wave of Wind: Stories from the Corridor*. This science fiction anthology will be released by Signature Books in April.

art: Steve Cavallo



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On the eighth day of my fever, the government doctor called my hotel to advise me to check myself into the Niamey hospital. He had sent some of the blood he'd drawn from me to Lagos for analysis, but in the meantime I had chills and I'd started shivering and the doctor told me I needed stronger antibiotics, cold baths, and closer supervision. "You North Americans come here and get careless in your eating and drinking, and then I see you with fevers like yours of 104," he told me in French. "You cannot let down your guard in Africa, and you cannot take this fever lightly. You come to me at the hospital."

I told him I would come, I was that sick. After we hung up I lay back on the bed for a minute and wiped the sweat from my forehead. I didn't think I'd gotten my fever from eating bad food or from drinking contaminated, imported water. I thought it was from the constant heat of Niamey that summer that had surrounded me and dried my skin and made me squint and sweat and lie awake at night on top of the sheets, listening to the hot, dry wind from out of the Sahara rattle my windows. It seemed that the heat had been trying to break me down—or break into me—and now it had and all the heat was concentrated in my head.

I called Ahmid, the driver the government had once assigned me, and asked him to drive me to the hospital, and he said he would come for me immediately. So I got up and made an effort to pack the things I might need—clean underwear, a toothbrush, my razor. Ahmid was soon knocking on my door, but he was not alone. Hamane Oumarou, the onetime court music master of the failed Hausa kingdom and now my friend, walked in with him.

"I came to wish you well and to advise you," Hamane said, and he held out his hands to me. I struggled to sit up and return his embrace, wondering what advice he brought. He held onto my shoulders and looked at me. The soft light from my one lamp made his wrinkled, kind face look saintly, and if I were a photographer I would have wanted to photograph a man like him in that light: an old, confident, decent man dressed in white, flowing robes and sandals and hovering over the bed of a sick friend.

"Your fever is not responding to the antibiotics," he said.

"No, it's not."

Hamane let go of me and sat in the chair next to my bed. I suddenly felt embarrassed, remembering, then, my responsibilities as a host. "May I offer you both some water?" I asked. "Ahmid, please bring the two clean glasses by the sink."

Ahmid went for the glasses, and I picked up the glass jar of water I'd set on the floor next to my bed. The jar felt cool in my hands. Sekondi Usala, the water seller I bought most of my water from, had sent it to me when he learned of my fever, and he had not asked me to pay for it.

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That would probably come later. I wanted to hold the cool jar against my forehead, but decided not to do that with guests in my room. Ahmid held out the glasses to me, and I poured water into them without spilling, even with my fever, then took one of the glasses from Ahmid and handed it to Hamane. "This is first-grade drinking water," I told him. I poured myself a little water in the glass I'd been using and closed the jar and set it back on the floor. Ahmid ignored the other chairs and sat on the floor by the door.

I looked at Hamane. This was not a good time for a visit or for advice. I needed to get to the hospital. Hamane had never come to my room in the hotel, and I felt embarrassed to sit on my unmade bed in front of him, unshaven and sick. But still it was kind of him to come to me, and I decided that a few more minutes in my room would make no difference in the course of my fever.

"I miss your music," I told Hamane, and he smiled. He had invited me to his house four times to hear his recorded music, but I had gotten too sick to go a fifth time and had sent him word.

"You will hear it again after this fever is gone from you," he said. "But tell me: what does your doctor plan to do for you in the hospital?"

I told him what I knew and that the doctor had sent a sample of my blood to Lagos. My hands were shaking, so I drank the rest of my water and set my glass down on the floor.

"In effect, Kevin, this doctor will continue to do for you what he has already done, only now he will do it in the hospital."

I held onto the bed and did not answer right away. Before I could point out the differences in method and treatment going to the hospital would mean, Hamane went on: "These treatments have not worked, Kevin."

"They have not," I admitted.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

I looked at him. I did not know where his line of reasoning was taking me. I knew that Hamane did not trust my doctor, and I thought he was trying to get me to admit that I did not trust my doctor either, though what that would prove, I didn't know. I did not know what to say.

"The question is not so much whether you trust me—I cannot cure you," Hamane said. "The question is whether you trust my judgment. I know someone who can cure you, and I will take you to him, if you will let me."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Askia Bakouri, the king of Zinder. He has the healing touch."

Hamane said this to me with absolute surety, as if his comment about the deposed Hausa king having a healing touch would be something I could immediately accept and understand. I would have laughed, at least inside, to myself, if most people I knew outside of Africa had told me

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such a thing, but I did not laugh at Hamane Oumarou and his beliefs. I respected him too much for that. He saw in the world forces of good and evil that I could not see, and powers moving behind the affairs of men and our lives and works and loves. Ahmid believed in such things, too. Practically everyone I knew in Niger believed in such powers and lived their lives in deference to them. It comforted them, I thought, to believe that their individual and collective sufferings were the results of cosmic conflicts and that they themselves mattered to the forces controlling the world and human destinies. There are worse things to believe.

"I have spoken to the king about you, Kevin," Hamane told me. "He has agreed to see you and heal you, god willing, if you will come to him. We can go now, before you go to the hospital. Ahmid will drive us. Perhaps you will not need to go to the hospital of Niamey at all if you come with me first to my king."

I looked at Ahmid and then back at Hamane and thought about this offer. I needed to be healed, and I believed I needed to go to the hospital to get healed. But what could I say to Hamane and Ahmid and their faith—except that I would go with them and do what they wanted? I owed them that much respect. A delay of another hour or two or three would probably not hurt me much. "I will go with you," I told Hamane.

Ahmid carried my things to his jeep, and Hamane helped me down the stairs. As we drove away from the hotel, I thought of Edward the Confessor and the other good kings in history who, the documents claimed, had been able to heal their subjects with a touch. I had never believed those old stories, considering them nothing more than royal propaganda. But here I was getting into a jeep with two faithful friends and going with them to be touched by their king. Perhaps a part of me wanted to believe that the world worked the way they believed it did, after all, and that our sufferings mattered, and that in some cases we could be healed by the touch of a good man.

They hold Askia Bakouri under house arrest in a twenty-room stone mansion east of Niamey. Sand dunes surround it now, and after sandstorms sand covers the road into Niamey. Ahmid told me that after the storms, the Hausa people of Niamey, many of them the king's former subjects, rush out to clear the road for him. He never goes longer than a half day without access to the capital.

A large, walled compound is situated in front of the house, and two government soldiers guard the gates twenty-four hours a day. But now, years after the end of the civil war, the guard is relaxed. On the night Hamane and Ahmid took me to that house, the guards stood leaning against the gateposts watching the crowd inside the compound and ignoring anyone who approached the building. We parked outside the walls

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and walked in. The guards looked at us, but did not question us or stop us.

"Men and women come and go here freely now," Hamane said. That night, maybe eighty people had crowded into the compound, most of them sitting quietly by the steps leading up to the front door. Ahmid led us to a spot against the wall near the steps, below an empty stone planter, and we sat on the sandy ground, Hamane on one side of me, Ahmid on the other. I looked at the people sitting with us; most appeared healthy, and I realized that they were families sitting with one or two sick relatives. Two mothers were trying to hush emaciated babies; one man held his unconscious ten-year-old son in his arms; an old woman held her wrinkled husband and brushed flies away from his face. Each of the sick people had fifteen or twenty relatives sitting all around them, watching them and the house for some sign of the king. People stared at me and my two friends, and I thought they must have wondered who we were, and why there were only three of us and why I was there, since I was not Hausa.

The front door never opened. The king walked out of a side door, instead. He made his way through the crowd to the steps and sat there and talked to some of the people in Hausa, which I could understand. He was a big man, this deposed king, and younger than I had thought he would be: early forties, with big arms and legs and a trim waist. He was a man filled with confidence and strength, yet his face was not proud. His face was kind. He seemed sincerely interested in the people around him. He dressed like his people, wearing sandals and a simple white robe tied at his waist. A mother handed her crying baby to the king, and he kissed it and held it tight against his chest, rocking it and speaking to it. It soon stopped crying. After a few minutes the king handed the mother her baby, and I realized the baby had gone to sleep. She stood and bowed to the king and walked away. Her family followed her, quietly, and the crowd stayed hushed so the baby would not wake. The king held out his arms for the other sick baby, and the second mother put it in his hands.

I started shivering again, and I wished I'd thought to bring my coat. Hamane took hold of my hand and looked at me. "You do not need to stand when the king approaches us," Hamane whispered. "He understands that you are sick."

I must have looked terrible to Hamane. I know I felt terrible. I'd thought we would have to get up and walk to the king, but I was glad to be able to stay sitting on the sand.

When the second woman left with her baby and family, the king stood and walked toward Hamane and Ahmid and me. "Hamane," he said. Hamane and Ahmid stood quickly and bowed. The king held out his

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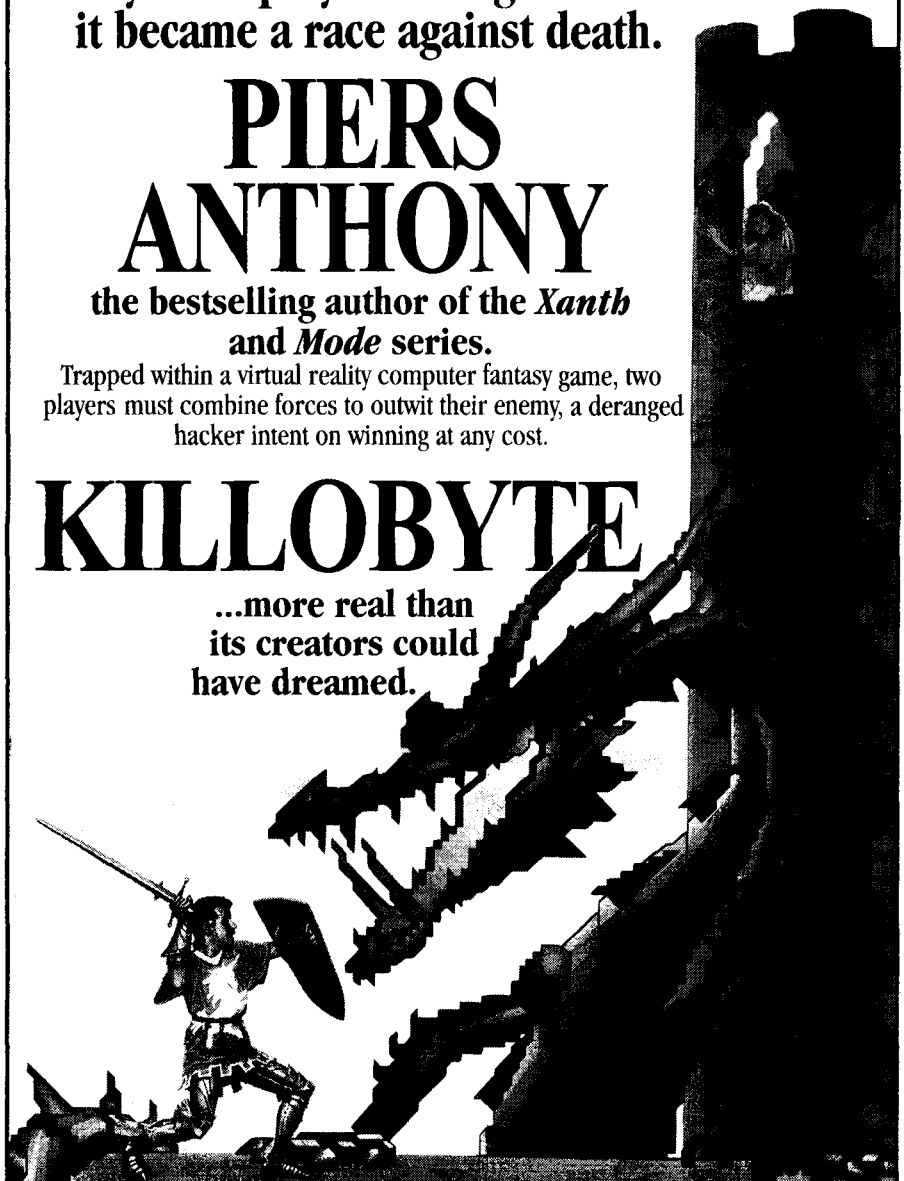

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arms, and Hamane and the king embraced. They spoke together for a time in hushed Hausa about me. I thought that I should stand up, too, even if Hamane had said it was all right for me to stay sitting on the ground, but I felt so weak then that I did not know if I could stand up alone. I was sweating and hot. "Ahmid, help me up," I whispered to him, but before he could, the king knelt in front of me and looked at me. He said nothing at first, and he did not smile. He looked in my eyes for a long time. The whole compound was very quiet, and I could hear a gentle wind blowing now from out of the desert. It felt cool on my forehead.

"You are a good man," the king said to me in English.

The English surprised me. The king spoke it with little accent, and I thought he must have learned his English at a university in America. Hamane and Ahmid knelt on the sand on either side of the king and me.

"Hamane has told me how you have helped my people, and how you stay here this summer to help us still."

"I have come to love this land," I told him.

The king smiled, then. He reached out and put his hands on either side of my head, leaned down and gently kissed my forehead. "Be healed, Kevin," he said. He stood and walked quickly away.

None of us moved for a time. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the wall. I could still feel the touch of the king's lips on my forehead, and I felt a sudden peace inside of me, and a great weariness.

Hamane stood up, and Ahmid. "Come, Kevin," Hamane said to me, and he and Ahmid helped me up and to the jeep. I slept all the way back to my hotel in Niamey, and was asleep again almost as soon as Hamane and Ahmid put me down on my bed. They watched me all that night, and when I woke early in the morning, my fever had broken. Ahmid brought out my thermometer, and it registered a normal temperature in me. Hamane took me into his house for three days to recuperate, and I was glad for the help of his servants, the cool rooms, and the water. My doctor was pleased with my recovery, and he prescribed a week's worth of two different pills as a precaution. I never took the pills. I felt inside myself that I was indeed healed now, and that I had been healed without the help of medicine. I don't know how it happened, or why, just that it happened to me. I sat in the afternoons in Hamane's spartan music room and looked out over the course of the dry Niger and thought how a king of this devastated land had kissed me and healed me with his kiss.

I saw Askia Bakouri, the deposed king of Zinder, two more times that summer I spent in Niamey. In July, I was invited to speak to the National Assembly about the World Bank's project to reforest the sources of the Niger and our hopes that because of that project the river might flow again to the sea, someday, perhaps in forty years. A general election was

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scheduled in Niger, and the ballot contained a proposal that would require the national government to support the reforestation project by sending workers to Burkina Faso to help plant trees. Many members of the Assembly opposed the project, saying it would take too long and it might not work and Niger had no tributaries to reforest anyway, just the other nations of the Sahel had tributaries—Niger would get no immediate, direct benefit. It was my job to help convince a majority of the members of the Assembly to favor the reforestation plan and to send workers to plant trees and to ask their constituents to vote for doing that.

I was nervous. I was not used to speaking before entire National Assemblies. But I had recommended the reforestation project to the World Bank. I believed in it, and I believed that it would bless Niger. The project would continue without Niger's active support, but as a nation that would directly benefit from the Niger River its support seemed necessary.

I arrived early and was surprised to see the chambers of the Assembly packed with people. An usher asked me to sit in the back, by the doors, and someone brought me a folding chair. A member of the Assembly from Tillabéry sat next to me, and he told me that the Hausa king was coming to address the assembly, and that full attendance was required on those days. I learned later that under the terms of the Hausa surrender, the Hausa king may address the National Assembly once a year at a time of his choosing. He had chosen this day.

At the appointed time, a door to the right of the podium opened, and a young man dressed in bright Hausa ceremonial robes and carrying a painted staff strode into the chamber. "Askia Bakouri," he shouted, "the king of the Hausa." He beat his staff three times on the floor. The entire assembly stood, and Askia Bakouri walked in and went straight to the podium. He wore a black, Western business suit, white shirt and tie, and carried no papers. Another young Hausa dressed in robes followed the king out, and he set a ballot box on a table next to the podium and left the chambers. The audience sat, and the king began to speak.

"I have come today to talk to you about the river," he said. He looked at me sitting on my folding chair. I had not expected the king to be an ally who would introduce my cause. "Without the river, our country is dead," he went on. "The people who live here now suffer because it is dry. The generations who follow us will suffer here because the river is dry. I say to you: stop this suffering. Let my people work to stop this suffering."

No one stirred in that entire assembly. I could hear only the sound of the fans in the ceiling. The king spoke for another ten minutes about the river and the need to reforest the sources of it, then he picked up the

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ballot box. "The nation will vote on the question of our support for the reforestation project," he said. "This ballot box will be sent to my city, Zinder, and I hold it as a representative of all the ballot boxes that will be sent to all the corners of this country. The people will vote for the river. I believe it. To that end, I bless this box and all the ballot boxes and the election we will hold."

He set the box down on the table, leaned over it, and kissed it. Then he left the room. That was all. No one dared move. It was the second time I had seen the Hausa king use a kiss to bless something—and with his kiss he had blessed an entire election. I was called up to speak, and after I finished the Assembly voted to support the proposal to send people from Niger to Burkina Faso to plant trees. A vast majority of the citizens of Niger voted in their election in favor of that proposal.

Weeks later, I stood shivering in my coat in the early morning chill, standing with Ahmid and Hamane Oumarou, as we watched two hundred young men and women from Niger walk across the Kennedy Bridge and head west across the desert for Burkina Faso, the first of many groups who left to plant trees. At the last minute, the government relaxed the rules of Askia Bakouri's house arrest and let him drive into the city to watch them go, too. He came to stand with my friends and me. The workers formed a long line of young people dressed in white robes, carrying shovels. We could watch them for a long time, wending their way across the desert.

In August, the government began to close cities. It was too difficult and costly to truck water to all the far-flung corners of Niger, so the National Assembly picked whole provinces to depopulate, and they made room for the people from those provinces in the cities they chose to maintain. With the falling national population, making room for them was not as difficult as at first it seemed it would be. Families moved in together; friends took in friends. I marveled at the tent city that ringed Niamey. It grew larger daily.

And the Assembly chose to close Zinder. I'm convinced the decision was partly political. The Hausa had lost their war to secede, and now their cities were being closed, their lands depopulated, the Hausa people scattered among all the other peoples of Niger.

Askia Bakouri asked to be allowed to travel to Zinder to bring out his people and to bless the city before it was closed. After some delay, the government said he could go. But they also sent along a good many troops, ostensibly to drive and guard the trucks and buses the government sent to move the people. When Hamane Oumarou heard of his king's plans, he decided he wanted to return home to Zinder himself, one last time, to witness the ceremony the king would perform. I made

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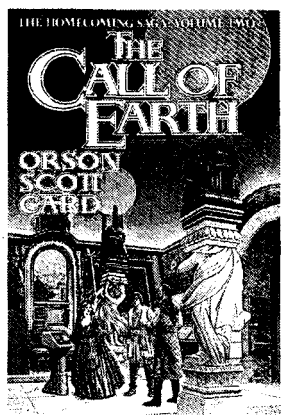

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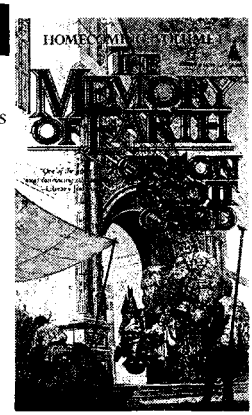

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arrangements for Ahmid to drive Hamane, and at Hamane's invitation I went along, too.

We set out from Niamey and drove east to Zinder. The last part of the way took us on a stretch of the mostly abandoned Trans-Saharan Highway. When we got to the city, the day was hot and dry. No wind blew. Some of the huge mounds of sand and dirt and stone thrown up around the city during its siege still stood. The city itself was quiet on the outskirts. The potteries were closed. The meat packing plant was closed. But then we saw a group of men carrying carpets from a mosque and loading them onto a truck, and the farther we drove into the city, the more activity we saw: people everywhere hurrying to finish their packing—furniture and goats and chickens and even dogs being loaded onto the trucks the government had sent, doors being taken off their hinges and stacked on trucks, windows pried out of the walls and wrapped in carpets and loaded onto trucks.

The city was being left with only the skeletons of buildings.

Ahmid parked our jeep a few blocks south of the main square where the king would hold his ceremony so we could walk back to the jeep and drive out ahead of the crowd. "We don't want to breathe dust all the way back to Niamey," he said.

So we left the jeep and walked into the square. Hamane told me the square had once been a park, but all the grass and flowers had long since died. The trees had been cut for firewood during the siege. It was now just a dry, dusty plain, with the main mosque on the west, boarded up, and three French mansions on the south, also boarded up. Hamane gestured at the two-story, white, stuccoed buildings to the north and east of us. "Those buildings housed the French colonial government of Niger for many decades," he said. "Before Niamey was even a city."

We found a little sidewalk café still operating in the corner of one of those government buildings, and we sat at a table there to drink water. The proprietor of the café seemed little concerned about packing up. He had even ordered in crates of drinking water, beer, red cream soda. "He expects to sell to the crowd that will form in this square," Hamane said, but for an hour we were his only customers.

Hamane did not want to see his old home. "I have said my goodbyes to it," he said. "I do not want to see its present owners prying out its windows."

So we sat in the square and watched the Hausa slowly crowd into it. By noon, the square was full. Families who had finished packing parked their trucks there or, if they were riding the buses, walked into the square. Those who were not done packing hurried in at the last minute to hear the king speak. Many families had little if anything to pack; a few pots, chipped dishes, maybe a frayed copy of the Koran that had been

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printed in Paris—all of this wrapped up in sheets. People started coming to our table to try to sell me things; I turned down chances to buy goats, old carpets, even a plastic toilet seat. I finally left Hamane and Ahmid to deal with the entrepreneurs and walked into the café to see if we could get sandwiches for lunch.

"Only cheese sandwiches," the proprietor said. "Goat's milk cheese on these hard rolls. Here, try the cheese."

He cut off a piece of cheese and handed it to me. It tasted strong but good, so I had him make up three sandwiches. "Beer?" he asked, when he'd finished the sandwiches. He set a bottle of beer out on the counter. The label was in French, but the beer was imported from a brewery in Togo. The label was bright and lively, printed with dense, green trees with vines and white flowers around the edges and red birds in the corners. It had been a long time since Togo had looked like that, I knew.

Hamane and Ahmid, being Moslem, would not drink the beer, and I would not drink it in front of them. So I asked for three bottles of water, paid for everything, and carried the food out to Hamane and Ahmid.

But they were standing, and the crowd was quiet now. The king had walked out of the mosque and into the center of the square. I was taller than most of the people there, and I could see the king clearly. He wore a white robe tied with his red king's sash, and he was talking. I set the sandwiches and water on the table and tried to listen to what the king said, but I couldn't make out his words. He was speaking in Hausa, and I knew that language, but he was too far away for me to hear him. I felt sorry for Hamane, that he had come to Zinder to hear this, but now he couldn't. Hamane stood quietly with Ahmid, both of them attentive. I hoped that Hamane knew the words to the ceremony so that maybe he could tell exactly what was going on without hearing the words spoken.

Suddenly, the king knelt. Everyone in the crowd knelt after him. I stepped up to Hamane and knelt with him and Ahmid. When the crowd had settled and was quiet again, the king began to speak, and this time I could make out some of the words. "Till we come here again," he said. He said a few more words that I couldn't understand, but then he repeated "Till we come here again" and he stopped speaking and closed his eyes. He sat like that for perhaps a full minute, in the utter stillness of the heat of the day, then he leaned forward and kissed the ground. The people around him kissed the ground, then everyone did. All the men and women and children who were leaving their homes kissed the ground of their city. Hamane and Ahmid looked at me, and for their sakes I kissed the ground, too.

The king stood and started walking out of the square. I had expected him to ride in his jeep, but he walked out. There was a sudden rush to follow the king. People hurried to the buses and trucks. Others rushed

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to finish their packing. I stood up, and Ahmid went into the café for a sack in which to pack the sandwiches and bottles of water.

"Help me up, Kevin," Hamane said.

I took hold of his arm and helped him stand. He was shaking. He reached out to hold onto a chair and steady himself. I kept hold of his arm. He had never looked so old to me. Neither of us spoke, and he would not look at me. Ahmid came out with a sack and packed up the sandwiches and water, and we all started off through the crowd for our jeep.

Ahmid took back roads south out of town, and we circled west and north toward the Trans-Saharan. The king had walked a mile out of town by then, and he was still walking. His driver brought his jeep along behind him, and it was a solid wall of trucks and buses loaded with people and their possessions behind the king to the edge of the city.

"He's making everyone go slow till the last of his people have joined the caravan and no one is left behind," Hamane explained.

Ahmid drove off the road onto the hard-baked dirt, and we hurried to the front of the line of trucks and buses, out of the worst of the dust, and slowed down.

The king walked ahead of us there, determinedly, looking, in his robes, like a biblical prophet leading his people across the desert. Soon he was radioed that the last vehicle had left Zinder and was in line behind him. Everyone was out of the city. He had his jeep pull off the road, and he motioned for the rest of us to drive past him.

"He'll bring up the rear," Hamane said. "He'll help anyone who needs his help on the way to Niamey."

So we drove past him. I looked back through the dust and saw the king standing next to his jeep, watching the people of his once capital city drive past him. I hoped he would not wait to drive on to Niamey till the dark when he would have to see Zinder lying behind him without lights. I watched him standing there till I could not see him anymore, and I started hoping he would have to take a family with children into his jeep to help them to Niamey, that he would hold a little boy or girl on his lap and think of the future that child might know when the land he and all of us had kissed was healed and the Hausa could return to the homes and the cities and the lands of their fathers and mothers. ●

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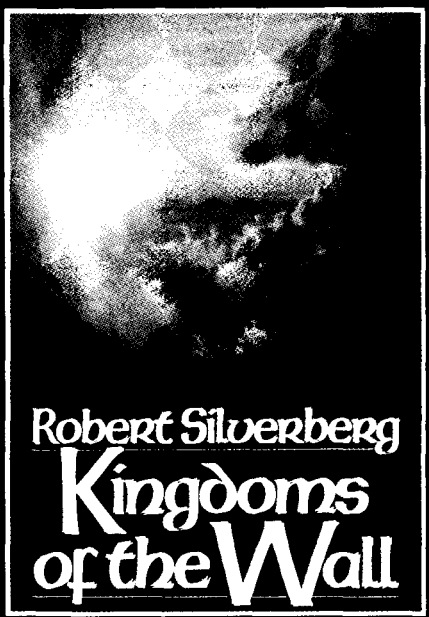

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Janitsu couldn't sleep for the street noise in Lahaina.

Hoots, off-key songs, and the shouted imprecations of tourists freaked on enz or drunk on triple-distilled space-station whisky (Special! Made in Space!) made her feel as if she were right down on the sidewalk instead of on the second floor of the moldering Pioneer Hotel. The smell of teriyaki cooking somewhere below reminded her that she hadn't eaten since last night. She'd been much too upset. But the unpleasant cacophony made her sorry she'd left the Sphere resort just up the coast, with all its hushed amenities.

Rough sheets, wet with sweat, entangled her legs. She kicked them off. She'd been tossing on the narrow, creaky bed for hours. Lights glared through the open window and the hooked screen door which led onto the balcony. It was too stuffy to pull the shades. Some stupid Polynesian prints hung on the peeling wall opposite the bed.

She didn't have to stay in this cheap place. She still had full benefits—Mijea, her supervisor, had made that clear. But to give her the news at a *staff meeting*, in front of everyone! She was, effective immediately, pulled off-station ten years early because of bone-marrow loss. The worst of it was that now they wouldn't let her go on to Mars, where she had planned to do her next phase of research, where she'd dreamed of eventually retiring. She was Earth-bound forever.

"It's free to hold the parrot," yelled the man who was stationed right under her balcony.

Janitsu rolled out of bed. She had to take another Halcyon or she'd never get to sleep. That damned parrot man was the worst of the noise, unrelenting and tedious. When would he give up and go away?

"Hold the parrot," he said again, as she went into the bathroom, turned on the light, and pawed through her bag for the little vial of pills. She must have heard his standard patter about a hundred times already: "It's *free* to hold it. What's wrong with your arm? Oh, there's no *parrot* on it! Only a thousand yen for a holo! This is Ed, this is Gertrude, this is Ichi."

His voice was irritatingly parrotlike, as if the birds had taught him to talk. She found the Halcyons, shook out two of the tiny white pills, thought about it, then put one of them back. His endless patter rose and fell with a flat squawk, ensnaring passersby, mostly slummers from Sphere out for the night.

She'd started her low-grav hormone work for Sphere on the orbiting Kukanzai station twenty-five years ago, a pioneer, before bone-marrow loss was preventable. Was that the *real* reason she'd been bumped, or just an excuse? Certain people had always been jealous of her, and perhaps her losing the results of the latest experiment had given them a bit of fuel for this purge. Mijea had assured her that Sphere would give her

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a new Earthside position immediately if she liked, or that she could live at any of the international resorts for as long as she wanted. It was all up to her.

Sure it was. She swallowed the pill and set the glass down on the edge of the sink, turned out the light, and stood still in the darkness for a moment. She hoped the anger would subside and let her sleep, but that didn't seem possible. She was sick of Sphere, sick of that well-regulated life. She'd only worked there since she'd been a starry-eyed, gifted kid of sixteen to get to Mars, or even beyond. She had enough questions—important questions—about how the endocrine system would be affected by life on a low-gravity planet to fuel the work of several lifetimes. For years, Janitsu and a few other colleagues had led the field. She couldn't do that on Earth, and her competitors knew it.

She found the T-shirt she'd flung on the floor and pulled it on.

"It's *free* to hold the bird," the parrot man said again, as she stepped out onto the warped floorboards of the hundred-fifty-year-old balcony, remnant of the brief whaler culture. She'd worked with whale hormones, had been in on the entire planetary genome bank project and the resulting endocrine studies from the beginning. After all that work, to be shunted off like this!

She looked down on his pith-helmeted head. His three wing-clipped parrots were bright splashes of color in his spotlight, one green, one red, one blue. Gorgeous creatures. They flapped, but couldn't fly. Like her.

He swooped his hand past their heads, and caught one by its beak. Expertly, he flipped it upright and held it out to some tourists. "Where you from?" They walked past, ignoring him, but he didn't seem daunted. "We have an arrangement here," he said. "A thousand yen to holo all you want!" One woman stopped, and stood shyly. Janitsu had to admire his expertise as he talked her into getting a holo. He positioned her inside a square painted on the brick sidewalk. As the parrot man snapped his finger the blue parrot—Ichi?—spread its wings, and Janitsu saw a flash of bright yellow underwing. The parrot man pushed a button on a box which sat next to him on a low wall, and the two laser/mirror spheres, a few inches in diameter each, rose from their positions on opposite sides of the square in a swift spiral around the woman and lodged in the collector above. Janitsu was amused to see that the magnet, from which the working parts of the spheres were shielded, was attached to an overhanging branch.

He motioned the woman aside, reached up and removed one of the spheres, and flicked it open. He took out a small silver disk and slipped it into a plastic box he had in his hand. "That's all," he said. "Works on any standard machine. I hope you enjoy it." The woman handed him

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some money, smiled, and tucked the box into the pouch slung around her waist.

He stuffed the money in the pocket of his green-and-white checked shirt. He was tall, thin, and brown, and moved with short, jerky motions. When he took his helmet off to wipe sweat from his forehead, a long black ponytail fell halfway to his waist and shimmered in the spotlight. He coiled it up and stuck the helmet on again.

One of the parrots made a sound like the inside gears of Janitsu's retrieval arm. A long, drawn-out mechanical screech, like the grating of metal on metal just before the damned thing broke and the results of the experiment which would have guaranteed her her ticket to Mars spattered against the side of the module. Had that been sabotage? Just the thought of trying to *prove* it made Janitsu feel weary.

She contrasted the noise and confusion of Lahaina with the resort she'd left so abruptly a few hours ago. A high balcony with a pool below, which glittered aqua beneath the clear night sky. Roll of surf gleaming white beyond in the full moon, a path to the stars. Or to Mars. Where she'd never go now. Rare wild sushi, not that farm stuff, flanked by green dabs of hot wasabi and long pink curls of daikon, delivered to her immediately when she brushed the orderscreen in her room. She even had her own hot tub, in which she'd sat nude for two nights, staring at the lush, bright array of stars. So clear here out in the middle of the Pacific. But not as clear as they'd be in space; not as clear as they'd be on Mars.

These were just riff-raff here, hustlers. The parrot man was an endorphin freak, she decided, smoking too many of the enz which triggered endorphin production. He gave off a weird, brittle energy.

"Here, Ed, take a little nap," he said as he flipped one of the birds onto its back and let it lie placidly on his open hand. He offered it to a man passing by, who looked the other way.

"Where you from, where you *from*?" he asked over and over. "What do you do there?" Not much of a question, really. Hawaii had been virtually owned by Sphere and its subsidiaries for about twenty-five years.

Then he looked up. She felt like a spy, and shrank back into the shadows. He couldn't see her up here, could he?

The pill was taking effect. She went back inside, let the screen door slam. Between the clicks of the palm fronds, which increased in intensity as the wind picked up, she heard, "Yeah, I holo you, your family, with the parrots, only a thousand yen. Cheap, eh? Use your camera if you like, take a snapshot. Same price!"

She closed her eyes. Yellow and red flowers filled her vision, and she poised on the verge of dream.

She was in Mexico, a child. With mother Susan, father Namu. Sunlight spilled onto the screened-in porch where they ate breakfast, miso soup.

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Her ceramic spoon clanked against the side of the bowl; she hated to pick it up like a cup. The sweet-salty soup burned her tongue. Dad drank coffee, Mom tea. She smelled sweet ginger blossoms and toast.

There were parrots in the trees outside, the jungle close in, so convenient for Mom and Dad to leave her and little sister Keiko with Auntie-san and go out to collect samples. The air was full of harsh bird cries.

One swooped right in under the roof and landed on the back of the empty chair next to Janitsu. A bright blue parrot, with splashes of green and red on its head. It spread its wings, and she was dazzled by the yellow feathers beneath.

She stared into its eyes for a long time without daring to breathe.

"Hold the parrot, hold the parrot," it said. She saw smoke behind it and tried to struggle away from the image, but the pills were too strong, and she entered the nightmare.

She woke just before dawn with a headache. Her T-shirt was soaked with sweat, and she was chilly in the cool, sweet air of morning.

She got out of bed, opened the rickety screen door, let it slam behind her as she stepped onto the balcony with its wood filigrees in the upper corners of the roof support.

The sky was streaked with brief ribbons of pink, then an aqua space appeared over the West Maui mountains, capped by clouds. A thin woman below in a straw hat with fake flowers was hosing down the sidewalk, a cigarette dangling from her mouth.

This is the world, she reminded herself. The world is not little white office cubicles, or a dome full of pleasure-gardens, or jaunts to the moon's nightside where stars glow more pure than Earthers could ever imagine. It's not a myriad of wind-and-string pavilions. It's a place where on-leave spacers puke on the sidewalk below your room, and a loud parrot man screeches in your ear all night. You'll be here on Earth forever now.

She stretched and groaned. But it was just ordinary forty-eight-year-old stiffness. Her bones felt all right here. They'd felt all right *there,* damn it. She'd been tested every year. Why hadn't they detected the unacceptable rate of loss earlier? She should have anticipated it, faked the results. The tests were bullshit anyway. She just should have paid more attention to the backstabbers.

The street was blessedly quiet. No magtrans—this was the outback. Bicycles only. A slow, lazy electric train made stops for tourists.

The parrot cart was empty, the holo apparatus gone. On the perch, two brown sparrows searched the seedcups with nervous pecks. The banyan tree in the park across the street had dropped so many baby trunks that now uncountable thick branches twined among the others, reaching for support, or holding the others up. It was hard for her eye to follow them

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down and untangle them, sort them into parent trunk. Some sort of birds—she couldn't see them—reacted to the light with a crescendo of haunting cries which made her think of a remote waterfall deep in some ancient jungle.

Ancient jungle. What was that dream again? She rubbed her eyes and caught its edge—smoke, pain, and birds singing—then felt it recede beyond recall.

What did it matter, anyway? What did anything matter? You'd think that after she'd worked so hard on developing hormonal balance criteria for space travel that she could write her own ticket. They'd wooed her with every perk resort they owned, fifteen years ago. She'd loved it, loved how Sphere gave her freedom to pursue every interest. Their new star.

But now? She hated golf, chief pursuit of the retired.

She went back inside and rummaged through her bag. She found her tiny black bikini and pulled it on over skin still smooth and unwrinkled. She'd never had children, and her tall, slim body was brown and not bad-looking, she thought. T-shirt, hat, polarizing light-sensitive contacts. Zoris. Set for the day. Tourist in paradise. Flowers. Aqua sea. Slummers, freaks of all kinds, dregs and richies, real life, real world, no more work for you, who cares?

Her vision filmed over and she felt the ache of tears. She sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to calm herself by breathing deeply. But she couldn't keep from crying, crying as if she were a child.

Her breathing gradually returned to normal. She went into the bathroom, vaguely glad it only took five minutes to get it over with. After the meeting yesterday, she'd run to her room and cried for an hour before checking out.

She stood in front of the mirror, splashed her face, combed her very short, very black hair with a swoop of the comb. Were those reddened eyes shrewd or stupid? She went down to eat breakfast.

The open-air cafe was on the waterfront, and just as old as everything else in town. It was refreshing to be somewhere which hadn't been created within the past twenty years. Nothing made by robots, all human, unpredictable. Real food, too, factored into the ecocycle, eat, shit, pee, be eaten. She looked across to the banyan tree park, with its fringe of hibiscus, yellow in the morning light. Eat CO_2, exude O_2, little flowers, my sisters.

Little trees, my aunties. Big banyans, my grandmothers. Auntie-san, Mama-san. Protecting, caring for her and Keiko, even after their parents died. "Coffee," she said to the waiter. "Espresso, a double."

She lit one of the enz she'd bought on the street last night before checking in, when she was so mad, felt the hit smooth through her body, watched the world light up. Careful now, don't be a freak. Then she

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laughed. Why not? Hell, she didn't have to concentrate any more. Nobody needed her.

She glanced up from her newspaper, and saw the parrot man come in.

He stood in bright sunlight in the entrance, lime-green shirt with red flowers blooming, room only for about three they were so huge. Darker green leaves twining around. Little vines, my brothers.

Little suns, little stars, my life.

Shit. Don't get upset. Earth is good. Earth is good. You can't stay away from it forever. Little brother vines, little sister trees. Little sister Keiko, running down the jungle path screaming "Hurry Auntie-san, hurry! The heli—the heli—"

And then Janitsu and Auntie-san saw it, too, the smoke plume rising from the pad, which must be the ultralight which Auntie-san had hated from the beginning, hated her brother going up in, while he laughed, saying, oh, it's so beautiful from the air, you come too, Kis.

Parrots swooped, screaming, blue, green, red.

"Hello?"

She jumped when he touched her wrist. She still held the smoking enz, which had burned to the stub.

"Are you all right?"

The parrot man removed it from between her fingers very carefully, very gently. She shivered, then tried to laugh.

"I've only done this a few times before," she said. She hadn't thought about the accident in years, had never *seen* it so clearly. She had only been six when it happened.

"Just take a deep breath, that's it," he said. His voice was different than it had been last night, quiet and reassuring. "Put your head down if you like. Good, you'll feel better in a minute. You've got to be careful with it if you aren't used to it. Endorphins are really powerful to begin with. You get this enhancement stuff on the street here, it can blow you away." She sat up, still a little dizzy, and he pulled out the chair opposite her before she could protest.

He looked into her eyes for a long time. She was surprised that it didn't bother her. It wasn't even as if a human was looking at her. His eyes were hard, birdlike, and they darted across her face with short jerks. Green. Caucasian. Lovely long eyelashes, sharp curve of black eyebrows which echoed the ironic curve of his mouth. There was something familiar—

He blinked, and the feeling went away. "The usual," he said to the waitress when she came. "And you?" he asked.

Rattled, she said, "Rice. Miso soup." Something she was used to. She wanted to ask him to go away, but that would be rude, after he'd been so nice.

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"Where you from?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"You don't have to say," he said. "Ninase. Kukanzai. Or one of the other Sphere space stations. We see station burn-outs here all the time. They get bumped, then go stir crazy up there at Kaanipali."

"Not everyone does," she said, annoyed at being pegged so easily.

"But you have."

The breeze in the open-air pavilion switched some strands of black hair across his green eyes as he watched her, too closely now, she thought. It was true that she'd put up with the regimentation for Mars, but she'd never quite fit, in little ways that bugged everyone else. She supposed it was her American mother. The regimentation seemed much easier for those raised entirely in Japan to take. They even liked being programmed from the cradle to the grave. She *hadn't*—and look what had happened because of it. She'd made too many waves. Couldn't help it. Half of her life wasted, and she didn't know if she could even *survive* away from Sphere. She looked up to see him still studying her.

"Where are *you* from?" she asked, upset when it sounded belligerent.

His mouth turned downward for a second, then he shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'm here forever. Stranded." He laughed, and his voice switched to the parrot's laugh, high-pitched and harsh. His nose was straight and long, his cheekbones high. A tan burnished his skin, smooth except for faint lines around his mouth and eyes.

Their food came. She dumped her rice in her soup and he made a face.

"Your food is even worse," she said. "What's that? Just a bunch of seeds."

"Lots of protein," he said. "You ought to try it some time."

She felt more relaxed after eating, and started to read the front page of the *Maui Times*.

"I saw you last night," he said. "You have the room above me. Maybe you should move."

She looked up from her paper. "It's all right. I have pills."

"Pills." He reached over quickly and touched her wrist. "Too many pills aren't good for you. What's wrong? Can I help?" He rubbed his thumb back and forth over the inside of her wrist, tilted his head.

She understood the unspoken part of his question, stared at him, then smiled. "So early in the morning?"

"Early is nice," he said.

They rose and he went with her to her room.

She was surprised at the gentleness with which he drew off her shirt, liked his swift, teasing touches. They changed to long, sweeping caresses which blended in her mind with the sound of the wind in the trees. His

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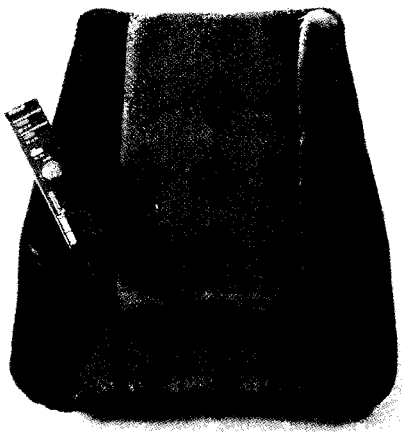

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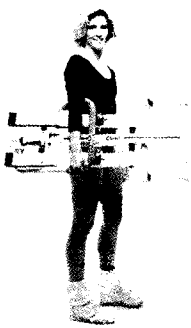

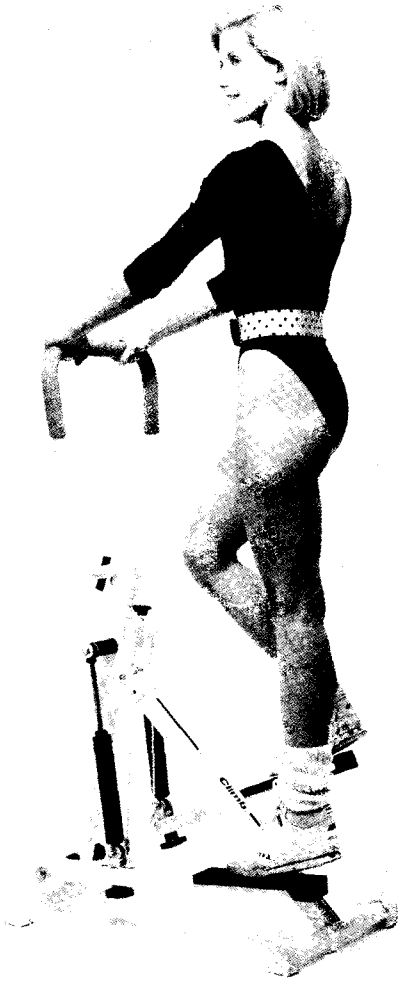

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silky hair fell forward and brushed her shoulders, and she pulled him close.

She liked the way he moved, so fierce and quick, when they lay side by side on the bed, one of her legs wrapped around him. How long it had been for her! She came quickly, and colors burst inside her closed eyelids.

He got up and went into the bathroom. She heard him open a patch packet, and the slap when it hit his neck.

She wondered.

He was back again below her window that evening. She couldn't sleep, couldn't stay awake. Still not on this cycle. Circadians all messed up.

She heard an odd note through the Halcyon fog as she lay in bed, one she hadn't heard the night before. Was it plaintiveness? What did the parrot man yearn for? Besides a quick lay with a tourist? There was something very different about him, but she didn't quite know what. She suspected he was a little crazy, but all the people she'd been around for most of her life were so homogeneous that she wasn't sure she'd know a crazy person if she met one.

He took something, some medicine, to regulate *some*thing. She'd sat out on the porch smoking cigarettes earlier, and saw him put on one patch, frown, take it off, look at it, open a little case, and replace it with another. A mistake, one which he could sense immediately. Fast stuff, strong stuff, vital stuff.

"Where you from? Want to hold the bird? It doesn't cost to hold it, you know. Hey, it's *mandatory* to hold the bird!"

In bed, she closed her eyes, and saw him swoop the parrot around his thin, bony wrist, around and around and around. As it fluttered and grasped with its claws, he turned to a parrot, too, and the two of them swirled around each other in a blaze of color, like a yin-yang. They they each spread their wings and flew off in opposite directions, into the velvet night inside her eyes, as if he had been one, and now split into two.

When she passed the cafe and saw him sitting there the next morning, his back was to her. She walked by quickly. She didn't need any crazies in her life. She didn't need anyone. All she needed was Mars, and her work. She could go back, pull strings, get what was her due. Maybe. It would amount to begging. It might be worth it. But not now. Let them stew. Let them realize what they'd lost.

She caught the train and went across the West Maui mountains, through dense jungle dripping with flowers, with sheets of rain blowing against her as she stood in the open section.

The other coast was where the wavesporters skimmed and dared, dropping onto the wave at just the right instant, curling over and over in

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their forcesuits in a wild, disorienting frolic with death, which was what would surely occur if they didn't curl at just the right moment, at just the right angle.

She stood on the bright golden beach in front of the deadly, furling waves and watched as the powerful offshore wind kicked up sand which stung her legs, as spellbound as all the other tourists. Death and life combined, they called it. A yin-yang dance.

Yin-yang like the parrot man, not of a whole. Part of him shadowed, hidden by the drugs he took. Jerky, birdlike motions, harsh voice. Birds which did his bidding as if they were linked mind to mind. Mind to mind as no one wholly human could be. Mind to mind as she'd believed *could* happen, just one result of what had been tried and lost so long ago.

No, she thought. That's silly. He *couldn't* be. There were only a hundred of them.

She watched the sporters float up, in their brightly colored suits, up from out of the foam, and jet back out to the breakline.

When she returned that evening, the parrot man was gone, and she felt an instant's panic. She hadn't even asked his name. Another man was there, far more polite to the tourists. She could see he wasn't as successful.

She was surprised at herself when she called down from her balcony, "Where did the other one go?"

He looked up. "Sentio? He had to take the night off," he said. "Sometimes he don't feel so hot."

She sat on the balcony watching, relieved. He'd be back. The birds misbehaved for his substitute, who kept saying, "No," and squirting them in the face with a plastic jug of water he kept in his hand. Gertrude bit someone's ear; Ed shit on a little boy's arm.

During a lull, the man just walked away. Janitsu wondered where he went.

Ed grabbed the perch with his beak and climbed down to the platform. Then he latched onto that and dropped to the sidewalk. He ambled off.

Janitsu watched nervously as Ichi and Gertrude followed. They beat their wings, scolding with terrible hisses and cries, trying to get off the ground.

"Pick him up," Janitsu yelled to a man who watched Ed step into the street. The train was approaching only a block away.

The man looked up at her.

"Just put your arm in *front* of him. He'll step onto it. He won't hurt you." Ichi and Gertrude followed Ed into the street, stepping down from the curb as carefully as crotchety old folks who needed canes.

"*Sure*, lady," the man said, and walked away.

"Damn you!" Janitsu yelled, and ran out of her room into the hall. She

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tore down the steps and ran out in the street. She put her arm down and Ed stepped onto it, his claws hard and scratchy. She put out her other arm and got Gertrude. Ichi pecked at her bare foot. It didn't hurt as much as she thought it would. The other man came back with a blue shave ice and saw what was happening.

"Thanks," was all he said, and he took the birds back, stuck them on the perch, and squirted them in the face. They squawked and shook their heads.

Janitsu fumed on the way back upstairs. How could he leave his birds with such an idiot?

She tossed and turned as she listened to his dull, well-mannered voice saying, "Hold the bird?" She couldn't fall asleep without her friend's harsh, aggressive badgering.

She most missed the plaintive note. It was well hidden. But it was there.

She thought she might know why.

She got a message the next morning to check in—Mijea had found her—and ignored it. She knew he just wanted to up her perk ratio as an apology. It made them nervous, her being on the outside for so long, out of their control, not accepting the next step they had offered. Why should she accept a demotion?

She couldn't remember when she had last been on her own, not on some space station or on some every-eyeblink-programmed tour. The hell with them. What else did she have? No family, nothing, all for the company, all her life. And now no *Mars*.

She went to the cafe and saw him inside. She hesitated, then walked in. She was almost sure. There were not that many people in a position to know, but she was one of them.

"Parrot man," she said.

He jumped, turned. "I'm not—" he began, a sharp, intense look in his eyes, then stopped. He smiled, but it wasn't a real smile. "Oh, it's you. Sorry."

"You *are*, I think. A bird-person. From the biogeneering project. How old are you?"

He took a deep breath, looked down. "I'm not—quite sure."

She nodded as she sat down. "Someone *took* you. And left you. You've read about it, haven't you?"

He closed his eyes and bent his head for a moment. When he looked up at her again, his eyes were distant. "Why don't you tell me? You seem to know all about it."

Janitsu took a deep breath, put her elbows on the table and linked her

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fingers. "I don't have anything new to add. The raid was very well-planned. Insider information. All of you were about four years old when you were stolen. Liberated, they called it. They landed on the beach with machine guns. I wasn't there myself, I wasn't on-site all the time, like most of the scientists. My work was more abstract." Think-tanking biogeneered humans had been abstract indeed, and extremely heady, she recalled.

She looked down at the stain a coffee cup had left on the table. "They just—they just dropped you into cities, at random. Left you on corners, in subways. Said that way you couldn't be re-collected, and that you weren't human anyway. It was horrible. They claimed that they'd made their point, revealed the operation to the world. Now it's against the law. I was stunned when it happened. All of us were. I went back to the island twice, alone."

"What island?"

"It was a small island in the Gulf of Cortez. Everything was so empty without the kids, so desolate. We'd taken kilometers of film, of course. You wouldn't believe how well-documented everything was. After the second time, I never went back. I made copies of the films and watched them over and over at home. They were all I had left. We were all so hopeful, so excited, and it was my first real project, to monitor hormonal development, stack the data against behavioral information, motor information, cognitive information. But it wasn't really the loss of the experiment that upset me. It was the thought of each of you alone somewhere in the world, wondering what had happened, growing up strange—we didn't know *how* strange—without any of the help we'd meant to give you." Odd, how crazy, how depressed she'd been. She'd cried over those children, memorized those faces, dreamed them for years. Her only children.

Not *hers* really, of course not. Hundreds of people had worked on the project, though her research had played a decisive role in making it possible. She'd never let anyone know how she felt, how she watched the films alone, late at night. Such behavior would have been questionable at best. Some had already thought her far too young to be working on such a project, and were jealous anyway, looking even then for ways to get rid of a young woman who—she now realized—must have seemed haughty and distant.

She felt now like the children must have felt *then:* abandoned.

Sphere, to duck the damning publicity, had shifted the lot of them to the space stations, scattered them anonymously among the divisions. She had loved space almost instantly: so straightforward. So constant. So healing.

And now they'd sent her back.

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"You're almost thirty," she told Sentio, aware that she was encompassing an entire, fruitful career in those brief words. She took one of her enz from her pocket, lit it, pulled smoke into her lungs. "It was about twenty-five years ago. Never any more of you made. Against God's will, they said. Let this be a lesson." She began to shake, remembering how it had been to be the focus of so much hatred, so many threats.

"Careful now," he said, and she saw real concern in his eyes. He smiled just a bit. "So long ago," he said. "You can see that I'm all right."

"Oh, of *course* you are." She reached over and touched the patch behind his ear. He pulled back and looked away. She said, "Life must be so different for you. Your entire awareness, your way of assimilating information. Hormones are everything."

"I think I know that better than you," he said, and the sarcasm in his voice didn't surprise her. "But my life is just fine, thank you. I'm very happy."

She let that pass. "Where did you get the parrots?"

"All I knew was, I had to have them," he said. "I grew up in L.A. On the street. It was hard. I—saw things differently. Later, when everything was a little more—shall we say, normal—I could tell the difference."

"What was different?" she asked, jealous of all the lost information, lost knowledge. God, the tests they'd prepared, the tests they'd done already, by the time they were abducted.

"Patterns. Energy. Flowers glowing. Oh, so bright. Sounds so sharp and meaningful, even the sound of traffic, the sound of rain, the sound of voices when they don't make words but only music. I couldn't get along with people. Didn't care for them. Felt nothing."

"How do you get the hormones? How do you know what kind, how much?"

His eyes narrowed. "A doc. Friend of mine. Black market. Not very fine-tuned, I'm afraid. It's been a while. He did a profile on me about ten years ago and figured it out, he thought. I never have been really sure." He looked at her bitterly. "Until now. Sometimes," he shrugged, "I don't know. Think maybe I'll stop taking them."

"That's not necessary. Or wise. Things could be much, much better."

"Quite the expert, aren't you?"

Why should she feel defensive? "As a matter of fact, I am."

"Then what are you doing here? Isn't your little vacation over yet? And what good does it do me to screw around with myself with all these patches anyway? Tell me that. What good is it to try and be like everybody else? Too expensive. Too much trouble. The hell with everything." His eyes lit up. "Ever been to the headlands to the north? Past Kaanapali? Narrow dirt road. A cliff a thousand feet high. Bright blue ocean, tiny white waves so far below. It just looks wrinkled, so far away. The

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wind—the wind is so strong. It could just take you, you know? Out over the ocean. People die there, good hang-gliders. World champions, they come there to die. Oh, God! Oh shit! You damned biogeneers! Tell me, what was the *point?*"

"One of the offshoots was to be the production of people better adapted to long space journeys. But that was just one—"

"Right," he said. He stared at her for a minute, then went on in a low voice. "Sometimes I wavesport, when I can afford it. Hanglide. Anything." An ironic smile touched his lips, then it crumbled.

She saw that he could cry.

She reached over and took his hands. They were warm, human. His fingers twisted through hers tightly.

It's not my fault, she wanted to say. We had plans for all of you. She pulled him out of his chair, and held him so close that his bony hips hurt her, walked him up the stairs, down the narrow dark hallway to her room. It's not my fault, she tried to say with her hands, her mouth.

But it was, and she knew it.

She knew he did, too.

That night, he refused to look up at her from beneath his pith helmet. She watched him for several hours, while people danced across the street in an upper-floor, open-air nightclub to whale calls rearranged by synthesizers, and amplified, it seemed, a million times.

She'd accessed some perks and sipped hundred-year-old whisky, spiked it with slowly smoked enz. Mexico broke into her mind over and over, a bright window of flowers, clear air laced with birdsong. A shining green river and the hot, yellow flames of death. The colors of Earth meant death to her, meant loss. Space, spare black and white, had come to mean life and hope.

She turned from the thoughts each time they intruded. Long ago. Not important. She bent her elbow, took another puff, tasted the whisky again.

She watched the parrots flap their clipped wings. She'd asked again where he'd gotten them—they were endangered—and why no one arrested him, and then was sorry she'd asked. Why should he trust her? He just said in his low, wry voice, "The world is not quite as well-regulated as you think, Janitsu."

Tropical night blossomed around her. The shuffle of feet on the sidewalk below was constant, the smell of grilled fish drifted upward whenever a new couple stopped at the brazier down the block. Business was heavy. It was a good excuse for him to ignore her. Torches flared at a Hawaiian place next door.

"Sentio," she whispered.

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He glanced up, surprising her. Sharp ears. "Where you from?" he shouted, and his anger blazed through the air.

She didn't mind. She remembered his thin, sure hands holding her hips, the way he cried out like a bright jungle bird, his green eyes which could weep and see flowers glow.

She couldn't believe that he had survived. How sad to still scrabble for life here on the streets. Who knows what he might have been, might have done, might have *known*, if he hadn't been thrown into the streets like a stray dog? They'd been feeding information to those kids like crazy, using every theory about learning enhancement and then some. And they'd been loved.

She went downstairs, sat next to him on a little brick wall.

"Go away," he said. "You'll ruin my business." He turned away and raised his voice. "Want to hold the parrot? Come on, don't be afraid," he called out. A mother and father turned around to get their daughter, dressed in a tight-fitting station outfit, who gazed at Ed with wide eyes.

"Do you remember anything?" Janitsu asked. "The waterfalls, the beach? The computers? All the toys, the games? Things to climb on—the best designers in all the world created your environment. What fun you had, playing, yelling, running. Oh, we had about five adults for each of you, holding you, watching you, taking care of you, teaching you, learning from you. A real family."

He stared at her for a few seconds, then looked away. "It's *free* to hold the parrot," he yelled. He stood with his back to her, facing the tourists, and swirled two at once on one arm, laughed angrily, and swooped them onto the perch in an elaborate bow. He didn't say a word, but Ichi reached out, swung on his outstretched finger for an instant, flapped, and landed on the shoulder of a boy who had stopped to watch, one with curly brown hair and a yellow-and-red striped jumpsuit. He shrieked, then laughed. The parents paid. Sentio handed them their disk.

"Don't be afraid!" he shouted, his voice even more grating. A little boy dropped his tofu cone and hid behind his father, who frowned and pulled him down the sidewalk.

Janitsu got up and grabbed Sentio's shoulders, spun him around.

"I'm *not* afraid, don't you understand? I'm not afraid of you."

He shook her off. He knelt and said to a girl with green barrettes in her black hair, "What's wrong with your arm? Oh, it doesn't have a *parrot* on it! Come closer, young one. That's it. It's very safe, don't worry." He carefully set Ed on her shoulder, swooped around and let Gertrude step onto the other, and put Ichi on her head. The mother and father looked bemused. "Doesn't she look pretty with a parrot? Keep your shoulder up. Want to go for a holo?" They did. Afterward, they walked on.

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"When I was a little girl," Janitsu said to his back, "I lived in the jungle with parrots. I even had one as a pet."

"Oh, really?" he said. "No wonder you like me so much." He turned and smiled, but his eyes were cold. "And I think you'll agree that my reptile brain works very well, once it is let loose."

She kept looking at him, calm. "I didn't even remember that until that first morning I saw you—remember?"

"Of course," he said in a low voice, then shifted into his high one as another family passed: "Don't be afraid, it's all right. You can hold the parrot!"

"My parents died there," she said. "They died in a heli crash. All the parrots flew up out of the jungle, away from the fire, the explosions. I don't think I've seen any parrots since then, not live ones. It seemed like the explosions would never stop. All the fuel was stored right there—" tears filled her eyes, and she was surprised. The third time in three days. The third time in twenty years.

He sat down next to her, and deftly transferred Ichi to her right arm, Gertrude to her left. He kept Ed. He pressed the release button and touched his nose to hers in the holo, looking straight into her eyes.

"Go get some sleep," he said.

She left the door to her room unlocked. Later, when the street was still, he woke her, ran his hands up to her breasts, slipped into bed beside her.

"What have you done to me?" he whispered.

She woke later because he was holding her so tightly it hurt. She stirred, and he loosened his arms a bit, but didn't wake. His hair, which lay across them, slipped from her shoulder and brushed her breast. The street was quiet at last, and the room was a jumble of shadow and fragments of surfaces lit by the streetlight.

His face was very close, and she studied the slant of his eyebrow. His long eyelashes fell a millimeter short of his cheekbone, which she lightly kissed. Then she closed her eyes and slept.

The next day, she went to make some arrangements with Mijea. Credits accessed and transferred. Computer time bought with some, to get all the information she needed. Suppliers, maps.

She couldn't do everything there, though. But she'd met a friendly woman down on Front Street who knew the ropes.

In the end, she was able to get a new name into the system, one which hadn't been there before. It cost, but she could well afford it.

She wondered about the hormone mix, then decided she could handle it later. She ordered everything in the book. They arrived in ten hours, cold in permchill until she needed them.

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She sat across from him in the cafe the next morning. She was sure he'd patched just for her, because he smiled, a genuine smile. Very much this side of human. She smiled back.

"There are a few places in the world where parrots still live," she said.

"Mexico, perhaps?" he asked. Why did he always sound so ironic?

"I've booked a passage for us on the next hover. It leaves tonight. Here's a new passport, and a ticket." She reached over and tucked the envelope into his pocket, tried to ignore the look in his eyes she was afraid might be anger. "We can take the birds." She stopped, suddenly aware of the weight of her assumptions, tried to think of how to share with him her certainty that this was right, and why.

He nodded once. "A big gift, from you," he said. "Why did you do it? Why didn't you *ask* me? I don't want to be on anyone's system. Not even yours. What's in that box?"

"Hormones," she said. "I want to show you what I ordered, and you can let me know if there's anything else I ought to bring. This won't be hit or miss. I can—"

He interrupted in a quiet voice. "I see. Yes. You can. You can *make* me whatever you want. You can mix my heart and mind together, and take them apart again. I know. I've done it myself. You can turn me into a bird and back into a man again. What *fun*."

"No," she said, "that's not—I don't have to—"

"So you intend to go to Mexico. Leave Sphere? Who are you kidding? Have you *ever* lived on your own?" His eyes were challenging, but Janitsu sensed fear behind his arrogance.

"What about *you?*" she flung back. "This isn't a real life you have here, Sentio. It's an absurd life."

"It always has been, don't you think? And whose fault is *that?*" He pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. "Do you suppose I'll have a real life with you? You and your little painting box of hormones? At least, here, my parrots and I are one," he said. "At least I don't manipulate and control them, the way you want to control everything in your path. Isn't that what you've done all your life?" His voice was harsh again, high. He reached behind his neck and pulled a patch off, flung it down, began to talk so quickly she could barely understand what he said. "How do I even know you are who you *say* you are? Maybe you've tracked me down, maybe Sphere wants me for experiments." His eyes were wide and glittery. He blinked, and took a deep breath, which he let out slowly.

He turned away, hands on his hips, and stared out at the harbor. After a moment he said, so quietly that she had to strain to hear him above the clatter of silverware and chatter, "I'm sorry. I do know. You *are* who

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you say you are. That's not a problem. I wonder, though, if you could help just—being yourself. If you can even see me as a person." He sighed, put his hand in his pocket, and opened the little container he pulled out. He chose two packets, opened them, and put them on his neck.

He turned back to her, and sat on the edge of his chair. Sweat shone on his forehead as he spoke. "You know, I saw something in your eyes that first morning. Like my parrots, something clipped inside of you, the option for flight gone. Whirling on my wrist, holding onto me with their fine, hard beaks, holding on so tight. Like you." He looked at her for a few seconds. "I have to feed my friends now," he said. He squeezed her hand and left.

She walked distractedly through Lahaina that day, coming down from too many enz, watching the play of light zigzag through palm frond filters.

Was he right? Did she always have to play with life?

Maybe she *should* go back to Sphere. Safe, cared for. She could really write her own ticket, except for Mars. Silly to get so wrought up over politics. She could come here often, visit Sentio. . . .

At six, after a long anxious day of buying odd things she thought she might need, she went up to her room. Sentio had vanished. She hadn't seen him once since the morning, though she'd tried to find him.

She opened and slammed drawers. She'd bought some new shorts and shirts, some heavy boots, but it still only took her ten minutes to stuff everything into her duffel. Supplies and equipment would be waiting when she got there.

Only the hormones, in their permchill box, still lay out on the rumpled bed when she was finished. She put the box in a net bag, picked everything up, took one look around the room, and stepped into the hall.

Where was Sentio? If he were going, he would be here by now. She stood beside the open door, wondering what to do.

If he didn't come, what was the point of *her* going? Why take this long voyage by herself? To unearth long-dead memories, to stir up all the pain of the past?

Why not stay? If she did, Sentio would let her do whatever she wanted with his hormones. She knew he would. She would do *good* things, change him in ways he would be happy about, the ways he wanted to be changed.

Yes, and soon he would *want* to come with her, to those bright jungles where he belonged, full of parrots, that place she had to see again. Wouldn't he? How could she not make sure of that? It was *right* that they go together. It fit, it made sense. She could *make* that happen, and he would thank her, once he saw what was possible.

Exactly.

Ah, how could he know her so well, so soon? It was frightening, to be

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so thoroughly understood, to know that someone could see her quite clearly, see all the flaws she'd always refused to acknowledge. She'd never imagined that it could be so.

Perhaps it was just as frightening for him.

She walked to the railing at the end of the corridor and stood for a moment, watching birds settle into the banyan tree for the night with their customary cries. To the right, she saw the hover, anchored on water that seemed smoothed by the pink and gold of sunset which colored the slow-moving swells. A boy, silhouetted against the swiftly darkening sky, ran down the dock with a fishing pole and bucket. "Hurry, Dad," she heard him yell, and any answer was drowned out by the engine of a brightly lit dinner boat which pulled out of its slip, laden with tourists.

She set the hormones down, watched the net bag collapse onto the worn green carpet, then descended the stairs.

The hover, with room for only eight passengers, was open for boarding. It was the only one, not hard for him to find. She stowed her small bag and stood up top, waiting.

The bare masts of yachts bobbed in the harbor lights. The speedway for the hover was lit with phosphorescent biolights which glimmered just below the surface, making pure, cool, green circles of light.

A few passengers trooped on and went to their rooms. An attendant closed a hatch next to her. She said, "You can stay up here for the first ten minutes or so, until we leave the channel. After that, you have to go below while we accelerate. I'll let you know."

Then she was alone.

She looked at the wharf. Empty.

She went to the other side of the hover and sat on a bench with a view of Lanai, the island across the channel. The hover rocked gently on the harbor chop.

It would take just twenty-four hours to reach the coast of Mexico. Another three days of increasingly difficult travel to reach the place she had in mind. The place where she knew he would feel at home.

But he wasn't coming.

She was surprised at the tears which burned her eyes. She kept her back to the empty wharf and watched the green-and-red gulches of Lanai lose detail during the swift, still minutes of sunset. One engine revved, then another, as the crew checked them out. She didn't move when the hover hummed with the sound of the gangplank retracting.

They maneuvered out into the bay. Her hair lifted in the breeze. Soon they would leave the sound of the engines behind, and only the hiss of wind would skim the edge of the cabin. Another engine roared to life.

She fingered the bright red abort button, for emergencies, set into the

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railing next to her. The other passengers would be annoyed at the delay, but it was still a possibility. She could go back.

She clenched her hand, jammed it into her pocket, and jumped at a touch on her shoulder.

She turned, and Sentio was there. His hair, hanging free, blew against her face and he grabbed it and held it back with one hand.

"It took a long time to persuade those parrots that they would be all right in the room. They told me it was number five. I hope it's the right cabin." He looked at her directly, but in the green glare of the biolights she couldn't read the expression in his eyes.

Then he held up the net bag with the permchill pack.

"I tripped over this in the hallway when I went to say good-bye to you," he said. He paused a moment, and she felt something alien, hard to identify, something that reminded her of sitting on the porch with her parents and Keiko in a pool of light, brushed by the ginger-scented breeze while her spoon clanked against the side of the bowl.

"I think it's yours," he said. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Next month is our sixteenth anniversary, and we're celebrating with an immense Double-Length Sixteenth Anniversary issue that will be jam-packed with stories by some of the Biggest Names in the business, as well as exciting work by some of science fiction's hottest new stars.

It's a celebration tinged with sadness, since it'll be the first anniversary we'll have to face without our founder, the late Isaac Asimov. And yet, in a very real way, the way that would have counted the most with Isaac himself, he will be part of our anniversary celebration, since the April issue will feature his work—in fact, his last major story, and one of his best stories ever.

For our April cover story will be the last and perhaps the greatest of **Isaac Asimov**'s Foundation novellas, "The Consort."

This was Isaac's own personal favorite of his recent series of new Foundation novellas, the story that meant the most to him emotionally, and the story that he felt gave the deepest insights into the heart and soul of Hari Seldon—the Asimov character who, in many ways, was the most like Isaac himself.

This is the last Foundation novella, the last major work of fiction by Isaac to appear in any of the SF magazines, and the capstone to the most famous series in the history of science fiction. If you're a Foundation fan, nothing else needs to be said. If you haven't read any of the Foundation stories, join us here next month and see what all the shouting is about. Either way, you won't want to miss our big April issue, since it marks an event of major historic importance for the field, and is also, sadly, the milestone marking the end of an era.

Our April issue also features a unique and moving perspective on Isaac himself, put together in Isaac's own words from private letters and conversations by Isaac's wife, **Dr. Janet Asimov.** And our evocative April cover, illus-

(Continued on page 112)

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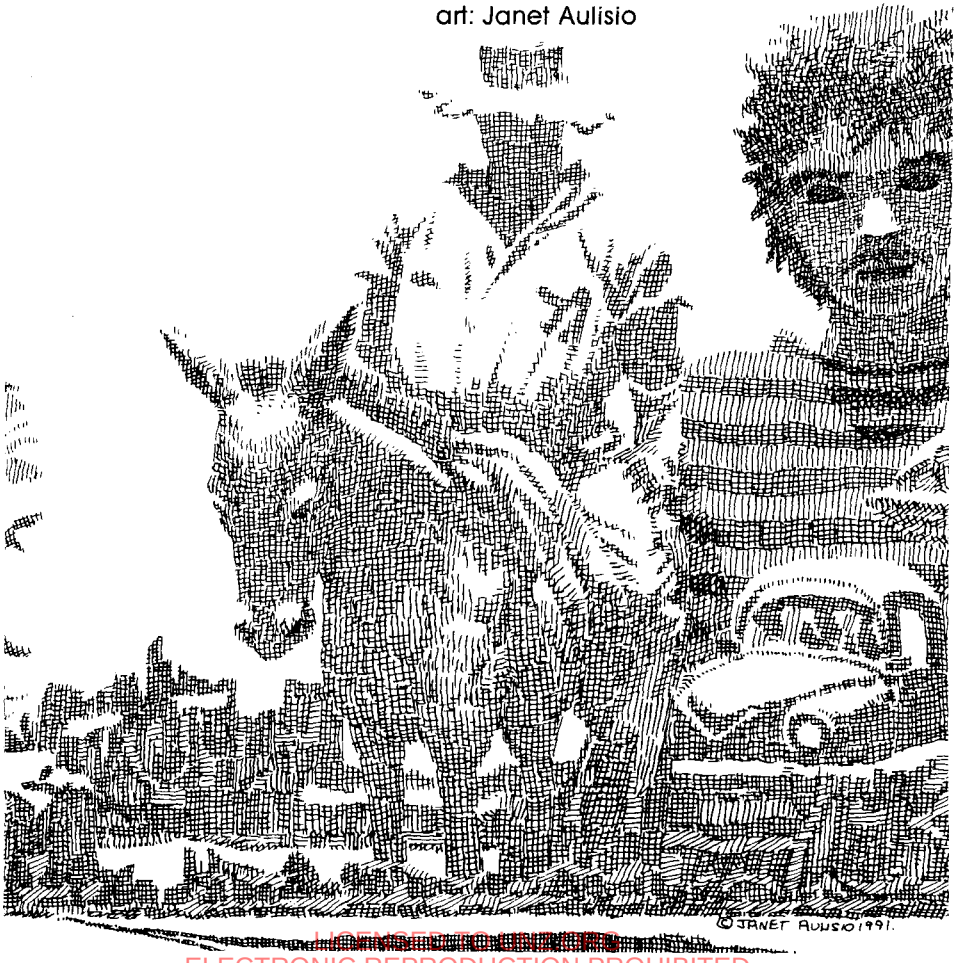
VISION QUEST

Joseph F. Pumilia

Joseph F. Pumilia is a free-lance writer and graphics artist who lives in Houston, Texas. His publications include stories in *The Year's Best Horror, Nameless Places*, and *True Tales of the Unknown.* Mr. Pumilia's electrifying "Vision Quest" is his first story for *Asimov's.*

art: Janet Aulisio



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"Why a wyvern?" asked Case. "Why Texas?"

"Why not a wyvern? Why not Texas?" she answered as the endless desert dried her throat through her eyes. She took a pull on the can of Staghorn and diddled the air conditioner controls, hoping to nudge it an angstrom unit or two toward something colder. It was already on the "Desert Only" setting, but Case had been meaning to get the Freon checked one of these days when he had a few bucks to spare, one of those days that never seemed to come. As she fanned herself with a battered paperback called *Red River Rifles* (which happened to have his byline on the cover), she asked, "Anyhow, what do you care whether it's a wyvern or a wendigo or, for Chrissakes, aren't there any other mythical animals starting with W?"

"The wampus," said Case, not missing a beat. "The augur-tailed wampus. Right legs are shorter than the left ones so it can walk level on hillsides. It has an augur built into its butt so it can drill for gold. Read about it in a Gene Autry comic book, must have been thirty years ago. One of those one-page fillers between stories. Strange beasts of wild-west legend. Pop me a beer, will you?"

He heard the "tsk" of the breaking aluminum tab. His tongue got ready to meet its fate. Worst beer in the world, but plenty cheap. He took a long cold pull, the best part of any can of Staghorn, when your mouth says to itself, "Thank God—beer!" Then a second later it says, "Shit! Staghorn," and your tongue rolls up like the sidewalks of San Marcos on the night before Christmas.

"I can't take this driving any more," he said. "Let's switch off."

He heard the map rattle amorphously. "There's a town up ahead. Let's stop there," said Clayla.

"What is it?"

"Sudo. Must be a Mexican name. S-U-D-O. Population under 500 according to the legend."

"Legend," muttered Case, parking the beer in his crotch. "The Legend of Sudo."

"The map legend, I mean."

"No, listen. According to this legend the people of Sudo were once under the spell of a sorcerer, an evil *brujo*. One day a child was born, a fair-haired blue-eyed gringo child, to a virgin. Said she'd never messed with any gringos, but they didn't believe her, even though they knew it had to be true, since Sudo was so far off the beaten trail that not even Staghorn trucks stopped there. So they exiled her to the wilderness. And one night—"

"You're making this up. There's no legend—is there? You know I never went to college. Sometimes the way you talk, I know you're making it up and yet I know you're not. This is one of those times, isn't it?"

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"Yes, honey, this is one of those times. You know, you're not so dumb if you can come up with a word like wendigo. Not many people know even one mythical beast that starts with a W. Now listen. One night she woke and saw her child was gone. Looking outside she saw . . ." He paused a couple of heartbeats for the legend to catch up with the telling. "Giant tracks, like a huge bird's. She heard a strange, hollow roar, like the cough of an asthmatic lion with a chest six feet deep. Then she saw the wyvern standing on a hill, its leathery wings flapping like torn sails on broken spars. It was prancing on its two clawed feet, slashing the air with its tail. And she knew that it was really her child. For it had been no human child she bore, but the kind of dragon called—wyvern."

They drove a bit, then Clayla asked, "Then what?"

"The rest of the Legend of Sudo is lost to history. The scroll on which it was written was eaten by cockroaches long ago."

After a minute she said, "You sure got a way with words. Not like most people talk."

"Curse of the English major," he said. "And where the hell is this town, anyway? Maybe it really is mythical. What's that?"

He slowed the broken-down Gremlin to look at a hand-lettered sign nailed to a post that still had the bark on. "SUDO," it said, and there was an arrow pointing into the desert. He could just make out the road, which was a slightly different texture from the rest of the caliche.

"That's funny. The map says it should be right here on the highway," said Clayla.

"Hell, another few miles that way and we'll be in White Sands with Cruise missiles parting our hair."

"Cain't be too far," she said, then corrected herself immediately, "Can't, I mean."

"Don't be ashamed of your accent," he said.

"I know I sound like a hick. I tried reading *Vogue* and that stuff but it don't help," she said with a pitiful sigh. "Shit, I'm tired of looking at hot rocks. I want to see a town, a motel, a Dairy Queen. Come on, let's see the sights of Sudo. Break the limit."

"This car hasn't been able to break the limit for a long time, honey, or me either."

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said with a smile.

"What the hell," said Case, and he rotated the wheel. The broken-down Gremlin stumbled onto the unimproved, possibly even antediluvian, road. The car's lack of shocks was painfully apparent.

The road to Sudo was the longest three-mile road he had ever driven. He had that familiar feeling that he was on the road to nowhere, an insight that often came to him, typically in the middle of the night with a stranger snoring softly beside him. The usual remedy was to wake up

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the stranger and have another meaningful relationship with her. Back in Houston, marooned on the police beat, slowly turning into an alcoholic, he'd thought he was about at the end of the line. Maybe whatever was ahead was the very end. What did he hope to find? A real dragon? Or a dragon of the mind, spawned in some parboiled brain just this side of sunstroke? The news item was a joke from the start. The lack of follow-up showed just how serious it was. Case had even tracked down the reporter, a stringer in the next county, who'd heard about it third hand in a truck stop and wrote it up right there as long-haul drivers looked on laughing. The story was full of words like "reportedly" and "allegedly." Still, there were lots worse things than heading confidently nowhere under your own steam with a tepid can of Staghorn slowly evaporating between your thighs.

Well, why not a wyvern? Why not Texas?

Time-soaked hills with strange organic shapes, dotted with armored plants, undulated along the road as they drove. At the end of the road, he had a sense of déjà vu that suggested this might actually be the end of *his* road. But with a flick of his will, in just the same way that one of those optical illusion puzzles clicks into proper perspective, his outlook became normal again. Death always comes *mañana*, always to somebody else.

Where the road disintegrated into an entropic smear of unnavigable desert, they found a place cradled between two hills, one gently sloped, one steep. An Airstream trailer, a once-shiny Bauhaus bullet, was parked atop a pile of rubble. A kitchen midden swarming with flies indicated recent habitation. There was a leaning outhouse, a small empty corral littered with fresh droppings, and an old rusted Ford whose tires had shredded from the heat eons ago. It was a pre-tailfin Ford, a plain, honest Eisenhower Ford. Case remembered Eisenhower. As a boy in Houston he'd seen the president drive down Main Street, waving at crowds on a campaign stop. Now here was a car like the one his daddy had driven that day. If this old car had hauled the Airstream into this open-air oven of a place, and if whoever lived in the trailer then lived in it now, then that person would have been here going on nearly thirty-five years.

"He'd have to be crazy as a buzzard by now," muttered Case.

"Huh?" Clayla asked. Case explained his Holmesian deductions.

"What makes you think buzzards are crazy?" she backtracked.

"The fact they stick their heads into rotting carcasses, that's what." He opened the car door and got out, leaning into the furnacelike heat as though it were a stiff wind. He knocked on the trailer but nobody answered. He noticed a small, faded hand-lettered cardboard sign taped to the door: "SUDO CITY HALL."

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"You ever have any creative writing classes?" he asked.

"Yeah. Tenth grade. Faulkner—long sentences. Hemingway—short sentences."

"How much does a hemming weigh?" he asked with a straight face.

Clayla smiled. "You had a point there somewhere, didn't you?"

"Look at this place. Remember the three things a story has to have, and how one predominates? Character, mood, setting. If this were a story, what predominates?"

"Character?"

"I'da said 'setting.' But you're probably right. Thirty-five years in the desert. Gotta be a character."

She shook her oversized man's shirt, whose loose tails were tied round her waist. The shirt was as dry and hot as if it had just been ironed. "I like this heat because it's dry heat. Sweat dries so fast you don't get wet. I hate it when my clothes stick to me. Take off your shirt, Case. Show me the wyvern."

He stretched and shrugged out of his T-shirt. The wyvern climbed out of his pants and clawed its way up his chest, its fiery horselike head pointed straight up at his throat, a bulging eye looking up hungrily at his Adam's apple, which the long reptilian tongue tasted with its feathery tip. The two visible legs were all it had. The bipedal dragon was a European concept, head and tail held high for running, not like its languid, snaky Oriental cousins. A good runner, combining the most predatory features of bird and reptile, the kind of critter St. George stalked through the fens of Anglia. Its tail was wrapped around Case's genitals.

A team of artists had taken a whole day to do it, so he'd been told, in a Saigon tattoo parlor. His buddies, clerks at Army headquarters, had gotten him good and stinking, so he didn't remember any of it, including the ritual of the virgins, the clouds of opium, the murmuring Tibetan adepts looking on with pineal third eyes. Since he could type, he'd been made a clerk, instead of being sent into the jungles to chase Viet Cong.

He had done a lot of research on dragons out of curiosity, and to have something to say about his own when the topic came up in delicate situations. Since Oriental dragons are quadrupeds, he'd often wondered where the artists had gotten the idea of using just two legs. Maybe from a stateside tattoo catalog. That would also explain the flaming skull with the Harley emblem on his left buttock, and the Virgin of Guadalupe on his back.

But sometimes he thought it might be an oriental dragon after all, abbreviated for lack of room, anything to fit it low on the torso so it would seem to be crawling out of his britches. After waking up from his two-day leave to find an itchy, scabby wyvern on his groin, he had been

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told by the guys that every woman he laid thereafter would be mightily impressed by it, even if nothing else about him impressed them.

They were right. So for years afterward, he'd insisted on sex in dark rooms, or waited till nightfall when sun-darkening shades were unavailable. Few relationships progressed to the point where the wyvern could be exposed to light. But for the last few years, he'd just said the hell with it. Some of them liked it. They thought it was kinky. Some of them wouldn't have anything to do with a man with a tattoo. Clayla hadn't noticed at first, even though he had undressed with the lights on. When he looked up, she was coyly hiding under the covers. Then it turned out she was one of those types who kept their eyes closed most of the time. In fact, she didn't notice the big, flaming reptile on his belly till a few seconds before his orgasm.

"Jesus Christ, what's that?" she'd shrieked.

"Wy-wy-WYVERN!"

Laying there in the cool Motel 6 sheets, he showed her the picture in the paper, the artist's conception of the two-legged dragon that had been seen in the desert of far west Texas, in the region called the Trans-Pecos, "beyond the Pecos River," where Corps of Engineers' maps showed a vast expanse of nearly blank squares, whole minutes of latitude and longitude with nothing of interest, as if God hadn't bothered to fill in his preliminary sketch.

"I like your dragon better," she said quietly, running her short-nailed fingertips along its length.

"Don't take this badly, but I'm leaving town in the morning. This was just a one-night stand."

"That's what you think, mister. I'm leaving with you." Then she added (and the literary lobe of Case's brain admired the reference to a rather standard cowboy-story cliché), "You saved my life. Now you gotta take care of me."

"What about your job?"

"I ain't the only waitress in Fredericksburg. They won't starve without me."

"No family?"

"Wasn't born here. Just sort of ended up here."

"Didn't we all. So you plan to go dragon hunting with a total stranger?"

"So tell me about yourself, stranger. Like, what's the typewriter for?"

She meant the beat-up portable on the dresser, same blank sheet in it for over a year. He had to own up to the four-year-old paperback jammed in the case, since his name was on the cover. *Red River Rifles*, first of a series that never had a second because the editor got fired when a big conglomerate bought out the publisher, and they didn't like westerns. And nobody else liked them. Or his, anyhow. So it was back to work for

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small-town papers, he told her, never staying over seven or eight months, and then this silly-season story about wyverns in west Texas comes over the wire. Of course, they called it a dragon, not a wyvern. Nobody in the newsroom knew what the hell a wyvern was, except Case. What was really funny was that it had only been seen by three or four people, none what you'd call convincing witnesses. An old guy at the LAST GAS 90 MI. filling station, Mexican kids hunting rattlesnakes in an arroyo, a bearded prospector named Jensen. It was the kind of off-beat filler called a "bright," or "quirk." Usually they're about UFOs or devil babies or boa constrictors in the walls, which kind of gives you the proper perspective. Unless you happen to have a wyvern nailed to your ventral surface.

"I knew I had to check it out," he said. "But my editor wouldn't let me go, even after I showed him my tattoo. So I walked out, got in my car and headed west. Never went back to my apartment. Landlord had it padlocked anyhow."

"Just up and went, huh?" She fingered the wyvern's backbone and watched it shiver.

"Uh-huh. In the back of my mind I thought there might be a story in it. UFOs and devil babies've been done to death. Maybe strange monsters are in again. I still know a couple of people in the book business. Might be able to promote something for myself. Especially if I can get photos, if there's anything more to this than peyote dreams."

"If people saw it, it must be true."

He rumbled meditatively. "Aw, might be a gila monster with a gland problem." He knew something like that was the most likely explanation, but his mind was packed with dragon lore that he needed to unload. "Oriental dragons are lucky," he went on. "Not so the European dragon. But the European ones have a stone in their brain. The stone brings luck, if you can get it out."

"You really don't plan to kill it?"

He exhaled and watched cigarette smoke helix up to the ceiling. "Of course not," he had said. "The stone's just a legend. Besides, a guy could get killed trying to slay dragons."

"Not if he's a knight," she had whispered, "a knight in shining armor." Then she'd nuzzled him and began to tweak the wyvern's tail.

After five dusty minutes sightseeing in metropolitan Sudo, drinking Staghorns and sweating through dry clothes, he said, "Okay, *vamanos*."

She grabbed his arm as he turned. "Case, let's stay. There must be a reason we ended up here."

"Huh? We're here 'cause you wanted to stop here."

"Oh, you're just being—rational."

It was an irrefutable accusation.

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"There's something about this place," she said. They both strained to see what she meant, studying the dry, cactus-punctuated convolutions of the landscape. "Anyhow it's peaceful. I want to sleep here. Let's camp out. It'll be dark in a few hours."

He was annoyed. But before he spoke, Clayla stooped and picked up a rock almost at random. "Look, what's this?"

He saw it was some kind of fossil, a worm segment or part of a plant, buff-colored, a fragment of a cylinder a quarter-inch in diameter. The ground was littered with them, mostly cracked ones, among other detritus. He scooped up a double handful.

"Fossils."

"Of what?"

"Crinoids," said the voice of a man obviously mad as a buzzard. He came riding on a burro from around a hill. He rode into the corral and plopped down a sack that seemed to be full of rocks. "Got some more here. Sea lilies. Animals that look like flowers. Used to live on this reef."

"Reef?" asked Case.

The man closed the gate and joined them. He began pulling rocks out and sorting them. He wore a frayed straw hat and khaki clothes the color of the hills. His beard was short and mossy.

"Yep," he said. "This here was a lagoon on the edge of the Permian Sea. Don't get many visitors, seeing as we're only a pseudo-town. S-U-D-O, get it? That speck on the map's a fake town the map company put there to trap copyright violators. If somebody was to put out a roadmap with Sudo on it, don't you see, why they'd slap 'em with a lawsuit so fast their heads'd spin. How'd I know? Simple. I used to be an oil company surveyor. They used our maps to make the roadmaps for their filling stations. When I retired, I decided to settle down in one of those pseudo-towns. That way I could be sure I wouldn't be bothered by anybody trying to come home again. But I don't mind company now and then. I like it lonely, but not too lonely. Make a right good living selling fossils to museums. They ain't too particular, neither. Here, lookit these trilobites. No bigger'n a pimple. Whole nest of 'em back in the hills. They sell'em for two bucks to those fossil-crazy kids. A good piece of crinoid stem, now, that's worth four or five dollars. But even these busted pieces'll bring fifty cents each. Amazing, ain't it? Millions of years ago these little squirts went belly up in some Permian gargle, and here I am rounding 'em up and herding 'em to market. Name's Kube, Estes Kube. Like a square. Just call me Estes. Funny name, ain't it? Guess you're looking for the dragon, eh? Must be fascinated with it to get yourself tattooed like that."

Desert does funny things to a man, reflected Case. He introduced himself and Clayla and explained about the tattoo.

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Estes hadn't seen the dragon. But he knew somebody who had: Jensen the prospector. Every few months Jensen passed by, and he and Estes would exchange a few words.

"Course, he's still seeing those army camels Zach Taylor sent here in 1858," said Estes, as he sorted fossils. "There's a particular canyon he sees 'em in. Lots of camel bones there. Now the dragon, he mentioned it casual. Didn't seem to think it was real. Must have been somebody else who saw it thought it was real. Y'see a lot of strange things out here, don't you know. Mirages, visions, things that used to live here. With me, it's mostly prehistoric marine creatures."

He pointed to the top of the steep hill above the Gremlin. It was topped by a grey rock shelf twenty feet up. The hillside was badly eroded, showing alternating layers of grey and white. "That's a limestone and shale layer cake," he explained. "See that shale ledge on top? Saw a big trilobite there once. Three feet across if it was an inch. Musta watched it ten minutes 'fore it crawled under the ledge. Dug around there some, but didn't find nothin' but carnosaur toenails."

He pulled out one end of his watch chain. The fob was a two inch claw. "That's just the tip," he said.

"That tri-biter," said Clayla, "you mean it was like a ghost?"

"Who said anything about ghosts? Young lady, there was a time when it was considered normal to see things. Indians, now, they took it real serious. They'd send a boy out on a quest for a vision. He had to go off in the wilderness and couldn't come back till he seen one. When he saw what he was meant to see, he'd know what to do with his life and he'd take his grown-up name."

"You think I'll see the wyvern?" asked Case, and he explained the distinction between wyverns and dragons.

Estes chuckled and waved a finger at Case's tattoo. "It's a clear case of destiny. You're here because of *it*, and it's here because of *you*."

Sorting done, Estes built a campfire, then disappeared into the trailer. He reappeared with a sack of flour, explaining that he used the trailer only for storage. He made effortless sourdough biscuits as he told stories of fossil hunting. And he told some of old man Jensen's stories, of Indian signs centuries old that pointed to vanished landmarks, of finding traces of silver that had flaked off the *conquistadores'* soapstone ladles, of skulls in helmets pierced by arrowheads. The tales went on past dark. They moved closer to the fire as the night turned colder. Clayla was spellbound. Case listened with envy, wishing he could write stories like that. He thought of the typewriter with the yellowing sheet hanging limply over the platen like a dried-up hide. He faked a yawn and pretended to lose interest. Estes brought a last story to a perfectly satisfying conclusion. The desert was full of stories, dreams and visions, he said. Then he

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stretched, stood up and shook the scorpions out of his bedroll. He climbed in, becoming just another dark bump in the landscape of the night country.

Case and Clayla pitched their bedrolls on the other side of the hill. They talked mostly about what they'd done as children and what they'd wanted to be when they grew up, and how they'd pretty much missed the mark.

"Daddy always wanted me to be a lawyer," he said, lying on his folded arms and looking up at the stars. "Never quite forgave me for being nothing in particular."

"But you're a reporter."

"And an Army clerk, a truck driver, a shoe salesman, a manager trainee, a law school dropout, author of a couple of cowboy stories."

"I always wanted to be a nurse," said Clayla. "To help people, you know? But I couldn't cut it. Flunked out. Now here we are, in the middle of nowhere, in a town that's not really here, with an old man who sees giant tri-whatsits."

"Don't forget Jensen's camels. I bet it was him that started this dragon business in the first place."

He turned his head when she didn't answer. He saw how the moonlight softened her angular features and how beautiful it made her look. She was looking at him too. He realized that his own rumpled physiognomy was also being romanticized. He unreeled one arm and she moved closer. Sleep flowed in, a moon-driven tide on an ancient sea. They kissed each other drowsily and certain parts of their brains and bodies came instantly awake. Too tired to make love, Case told himself. Not here in the dirt, thought Clayla. He began to unbutton her shirt, but stopped when he saw his hand. It seemed smaller, spidery, yet savagely prehensile. More suitable for digging into hidden caches of eggs than unbuttoning clothes. But the impression vanished almost as soon as he noticed it. Fingers fumbled at buttons, snaps, zippers. Without condoms, without spermicides, without thinking, they molded into each other as the desert yielded up its heat to the night. Case felt the wyvern shiver, leap, and plunge deep into the sea of a hotter sun. Its hoary wake rushed inland, springing into breakers at the shore, churning up startled trilobites and nautiloids, agitating the crinoids and spending itself upon the white sand of the coral reef.

About ten minutes to midnight, he opened his eyes and sat up and looked around. The wind vibrated among the hills with the thrum of a deep organ chord. Naked, he shivered. He had only to wait a few seconds for a repetition of the sound that had drawn him up from the depths of sleep. It was like the sound of Estes' sack of rocks being dropped over and over, plop, plop. Just behind the hill. He crawled from the sleeping

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bag and slipped on his shoes. No time for clothes, for that would be the wyvern coming to have a look at the only man in the world with a wyvern tattoo. He remembered the camera in the car—but had he really come here to photograph wyverns, or even write about them?

Clayla was snoring gently, head tucked into the bedroll, body curled up as though she had just been taken from a large egg. Looking into the night he heard the monster's footfalls ominously louder. Should he go to the vision? Or let the vision come to him?

He felt the wyvern on his chest coiling, trying to double him up into a bite-sized ball. Forcing himself upright, he felt sweat cold and clammy on back and groin. The accusing footsteps were like the slow beats of a bass drum, or the measured tread of an executioner, or both. He swallowed, his throat filled with alkali desolation.

He couldn't remember when he had started running. Halfway to the trailer he realized he'd left Clayla in the bedroll. It took precious seconds to get his legs moving back in her direction, toward the heavy, patient footsteps. When he got to where Clayla should have been, she wasn't there, nor the bedroll. It was the wrong hill.

"Clayla, where are you?" The wind dragged his voice away into the maze of gullies. Was he dreaming? No. Only in dreams is there ever any doubt.

He decided to run to the left. And as if to confirm the reality of his plight, he banged his ankle painfully on a rock. Rising, he made his way toward a familiar hummocky shape. But there was no one there either. He ran two hills in the opposite direction. No sign of Clayla. Should he run four hills back the other way? Or keep going the way he was heading?

But while he'd been looking for Clayla, the wyvern had been looking for him. Case heard its breathing first, in a lull of the wind. Then a stone scuttled down a hill. He lifted his eyes in increments until the full horror came into view. It was stamping in place, prancing on the crest. Pebbles fled like mice from under great birdlike feet, cascading down the hill and skittering past Case's city shoes. In the moonlight he saw daggerlike teeth sparkle between the long jaws. The lower mandible was in constant motion, as if in anticipation of some Trimalchian feast to come. Streams of saliva fell from its mouth like crystal ropes. The huge bulk of it was balanced on almost-human legs, unbelievable thighs merging at the rear into a tail like a battering ram, held rigidly behind and parallel to the hilltop. Strangely, it had not two wings but one, unfurled in the middle of its back like a stiff Spanish fan. The wing, if that's what it was, might have been eight or ten feet tall. Hard to estimate the creature's size. Fifteen or twenty feet high. Thirty, forty feet long. It looked grey, but maybe all wyverns were grey in the dark.

But wait. Wyverns don't have arms! He wasted a few seconds puzzling

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over the vestigial, apparently useless arms protruding from the creature's chest. Each was bifurcated at the wrist into double claws.

A cough from above galvanized him. Droplets of saliva splashed against his face. The wyvern's gaze was fixed upon him, and the wind turned hot for a few seconds as the furnace of its breath tested him for the crucible of its belly. Massive thighs moved with an audible snap of sinew.

Case turned and fled toward and then up the next hill with an effortlessness that surprised him. If he kept up this speed, he'd have no trouble losing the monster in the labyrinthine terrain. As he reached the top, the wyvern was just starting its ascent. Case ran down the other side, exhultant at this hairsbreadth escape, this freedom. Grinning like an idiot, he slipped bare-assed between the wind, speeding ahead of the big jaws on a wave of abstract fear.

He paused at the top of the next one, not even feeling winded. The adrenaline was finally going to work.

Then with a shock he saw Clayla below, still in the bedroll, asleep. The fear solidified into a block of ice in his guts. If he'd seen himself lying beside her, his mind might have been more settled concerning the reality of current events. But he wasn't there. He was here.

"Run, Clayla! Run!" he called over and over as the beast behind him stumbled, slipped, regained its footing. Clayla sat up. Sleepily she recognized the naked, gesticulating parody of a man. He called out again. Hand to ear, she shook her head. Looking down the opposite side, he saw the wyvern loping upward, body angled parallel to the slope, low for traction. It was keeping its balance with the vestigial arms, which brushed against the hillside, reminding him of the asymmetrical legs of a wampus.

Turning, he saw Clayla coming up, unable to understand his frantic charades. She was barefoot, wearing only a shirt, her thin body outlined by the ardent wind. She'd never outrun the wyvern. Her feet would be cut to pieces on the rocks.

There was only one thing to do. He hefted two softball-sized stones and turned to the opposite slope. "Yaah!" he screamed, running down at the approaching horror. It was less than fifty feet away. He hurled the rocks at its snout. One might have hit, for he saw the heavy reptilian head twitch slightly. Got its attention, he thought.

"Yaah!" It was the yell of a horseman charging a cannon. He ran straight at the mouth that dipped to scoop him up. That yawn was a foot and a half across. He couldn't stop, but altered his downhill dash slightly. He crashed into a leg like a tree bole, bashing his cheek on a warty kneecap. As he fell back, the slanted moonlight showed him the lunaresque surface of the overhanging belly, full of bosses and fissures. The

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nightmare head swung down, trying to peer under its paunch and get at him. He scrambled to his feet, half rolled, half ran down the hill, dodging a tail the thickness of a natural gas pipeline. Down and away from Clayla, whose questioning voice was getting closer.

"Yaaah!" he cried over his shoulder, a primal, wordless scream of terror and bravado.

He reached bottom as the wyvern was doubling back at the crest of the hill to follow. It and Clayla nearly collided, but it couldn't have changed course if it had wanted to, for momentum and hunger kept its mind locked on Case.

Halfway up the next rise, he looked back to see the wyvern gaining, kicking sand into the teeth of the wind, making a sound like an elephant mating with a locomotive. In the distance, the burro brayed. Case, his face a wild grimace, practically flew over the top of the hill and ran down the other side in aimless, headlong career. His city shoes were nearly torn from his feet by the brutal earth.

Exhaustion finally caught him up short and saddled him with a truckload of bricks. He fell to his knees, gasping for breath and wiping sand and sweat from his eyes, which was lucky, for he found himself about to run down a hill that *had* no other side. It was the cutaway bank over the Airstream. He saw the trailer's pill-bug shape below, and nearby the dark bump of a bedroll.

"Estes, wake up!" he cried. But the old man slept sound as a fossil. The pile driver sound of the running wyvern reminded him that he was trapped. The only way was down. With a deep breath, he eased over the edge. In daylight he might have picked a safe route. It was only twenty feet down, but Christ, that was two stories, and just seconds to go.

Then, just a yard down, he saw the shale ledge Estes had pointed out. Maybe he could hide there!

As he hunkered down on the ledge, the wyvern topped the hill at a slow trot. It had lost most of its momentum. He'd vaguely hoped it might step off the cliff in its eagerness to devour him, but it lumbered to a halt and scanned the scene patiently, moving its head slowly and smoothly on the axis of its spine. It must have smelled him, for it came straight at him with a deliberate, now-I've-got-you-breakfast kind of walk. At the brink it looked down and saw him cowering on the ledge, a small naked mammal, an eater of eggs.

The three-foot drop seemed to give it pause. It delicately felt around with its scimitar toenails till it came upon a sort of natural ramp. It stepped out gingerly, then slid slightly in loose rubble before it hit solidly on the ledge, teetering on the very edge. It showed no fear of heights. Case's heart stopped for long seconds, hoping the Brobdingnagian ballet would end in reptilian tragedy. The great tail swung this way and that

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before the monster caught its balance on the precipice with the grace of a danseur. Moonlight sparkled in one gemlike eye as a protective membrane snapped clear of the eyeball. The black slit pupil spread wide like a vertical mouth as it fixed on Case shivering in shadow.

He tried to melt into the rock. But the mouthlike eyes found him. The hooked talons on the infantile forearms made clicking sounds as they opened and closed. Down came the mouth, the tongue flattened for the bite, the wind of its breath vacuuming in his savory scent. He looked up into jaws that seemed to fill the sky. There was a loud crunch. Case and the wyvern rode down the hill on the slab of shale.

He knew he was alive when he smelled sourdough baking. He opened his eyes with mental crowbars as spikes of sunlight squeezed in. Somebody had managed to dress him in shorts. A hanging blanket protected him from the sun. Midmorning, and already an oven of a day. Heat and pain had roused him. The pain was in his rump, ankle, and other assorted sites. There was a knot on his head that felt as big as a fist.

"I saw it too," said Estes, suddenly appearing with a pot of coffee. His voice was matter-of-fact. "Spinosaurus, a theropod of the Upper Cretaceous. You looked pretty funny sliding down the hill in your birthday suit."

"I thought you were asleep," said Case, his voice a leftover echo.

"That was just my bedroll. Noise woke me up. I was over by the hill opposite. Hollered at you, but I guess the wind was too loud."

"Spinosaurus," said Case. He'd never heard the word. He'd never even read a book on dinosaurs. Estes splashed some coffee into a mug. Case took a single swallow. It tasted like liquid fire with a heavy petroleum aftertaste.

Estes helped him sit up and he realized how sore he really was.

"Big dorsal fin's the giveaway," said Estes. "Other than that, a lot like the rest of your carnosaurs. Notice what kind of eyes it had?"

"Like a cat. Where's Clayla?"

"Hmmm. Night hunter," said Estes as if he'd half expected it. "Young lady took the burro to the road to flag down a car. Rides pretty fair, considering she don't know how. Your car was kinda smashed when the rocks hit it. But from the looks of it, it couldn't have lasted much longer anyway."

"Help me up. I want to see it."

Estes laughed. He knew Case meant the wyvern. He shook his head, admonishing Case with a smile.

"Not there, huh?" Case eased his aching bones back into place.

"Course it ain't there. That ledge fell down by itself, boy! Why, it's been hanging there a hundred million years. Ain't it about time it dropped off?

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You were sleepwalking, weren't you? That better be your story, boy. Dinosaurs, hell! What's the matter, don't you like my coffee?"

Case took another sip. It was a welcome change from Staghorn.

"Take a squint at this," said Estes, helping him up. "Just over there. Base of the cliff."

They shambled to the site like a pair of Siamese twins. Case didn't see anything special as Estes helped him to a shady boulder cool enough to sit on. The old man pointed out an oblong rock about three feet at the longest.

"Came down with the ledge. This end's the snout. See, an eye."

Yes, there in the rock, a bony orbit brimming with stone. Darker-colored bones could be seen embedded in the badly eroded matrix.

"Remember that toenail I found?" Estes patted his watch pocket. "It was his, from this same hill. Most of the rest of him's up there too, I bet."

"Did Clayla see it? I mean, last night—"

"Heck, we all saw it. Or we dreamed we saw it. Doesn't pay to figure it out logically. Main thing is to figure out what it means. Truth's more important than the facts."

"What do you think it means?"

"*You're* the one it was meant for. You got the tattoo, don't you? Me'n the little lady're just bystanders."

Clayla returned about noon with a Mexican family in a pickup, having left the burro tied at the roadside. Arms and legs of numerous kids and kin dangled from the back. They agreed to take Case and Clayla to the nearest town with a bus stop in return for a tank of gas.

They packed the stuff they'd need in one small suitcase. He insisted on keeping the typewriter. All the keys seemed to work except "M," but that's how it had always been. The rest of the stuff they gave to the Mexicans.

While waiting for Estes to pack a crate of fossils for mailing to a museum, Case and Clayla watched the Mexican kids play around the spinosaurus skull, dancing and singing and jumping on and over it. Then Estes came back with the box, and the Mexicans took it. They began walking toward the truck.

"Write me sometime," said Estes. "I'd like to know if you figure out what it means."

There was a loud shout behind them. The kids came running to papa, scolding each other. Case looked back and saw that the rock and the skull it encased had split in two. One kid was bending over it, probing inside. He pulled out something big as a fist, looked it over, then slammed it down on a flat boulder, where it broke open.

Hobbling Case was the last to arrive. Estes held it out for him to see. It was like half of an egg with a shell two inches thick. The inside was

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hollow, lined with a fantasy of crystals in shades of purple. From the kids' jabbering, he gathered that the thing was worth money.

"Geode," said Estes. "Ones like this'll fetch a pretty penny at a rock shop, don't you know. Can't figure how it got in the skull." He handed the geode to Case, who squinted at the purple crystals as they tossed the sun back into his face.

"I know what it means," he whispered.

Estes looked at Clayla, and she said, "Wyverns have a stone in their brain that brings luck, if you can get it out."

"Very lucky," agreed the Mexican. "It'll bring good money."

Estes rode with them in the truck to the highway. En route, it was agreed that the *niño* who'd found the geode would keep half, and Case would keep the other half, because he'd had a dream and had known where it would be found. "My cousin, he was hunting snakes and he saw a big one like that," said the boy. Only later did Case realize he wasn't talking about geodes but about Case's tattoo showing through his half-open shirt.

At the highway they found the burro waiting patiently. Estes untied it from the cactus and climbed on. He exchanged a few words with the Mexican in Spanish, then doffed his hat at Case and Clayla.

"Adios! Come see me sometime!"

"We will, if I can get the boss to pay expenses," said Case. "I'm asking for my job back. And Clayla's going back to school."

"I am?"

"You am. Because you'll need a good job to support me while I write a book about wyverns." To Estes he said, "Watch out for those visions."

Estes put his hat back on. "Big difference 'tween seeing a vision and having a vision," he said. "Ain't it?"

The truck lurched onto the asphalt. As it drove away, Case and Clayla and the Mexicans in the truck bed waved at Estes. The wind rushed over them, and over the hills around them, like the breakers of an ancient, endless sea. ●

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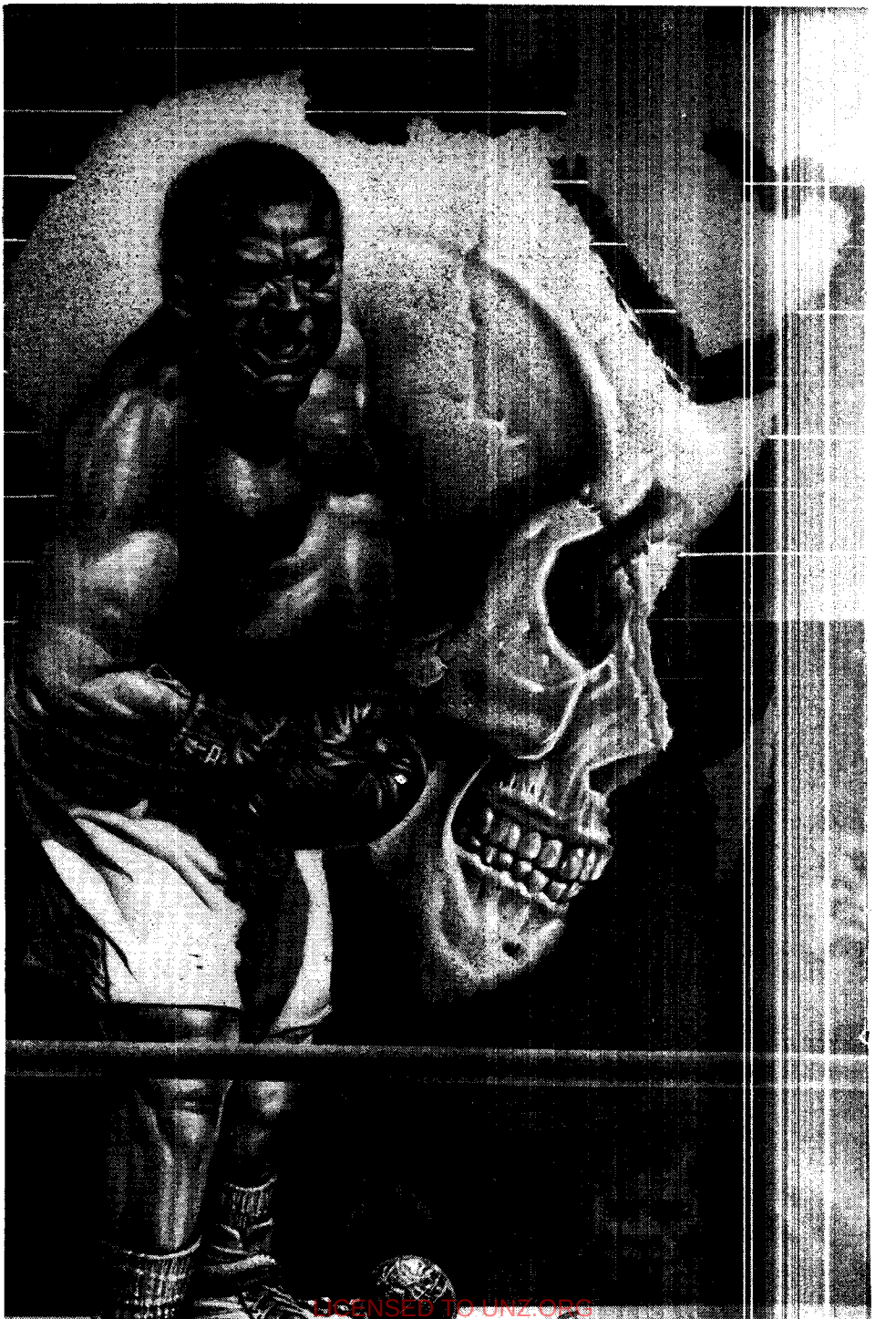

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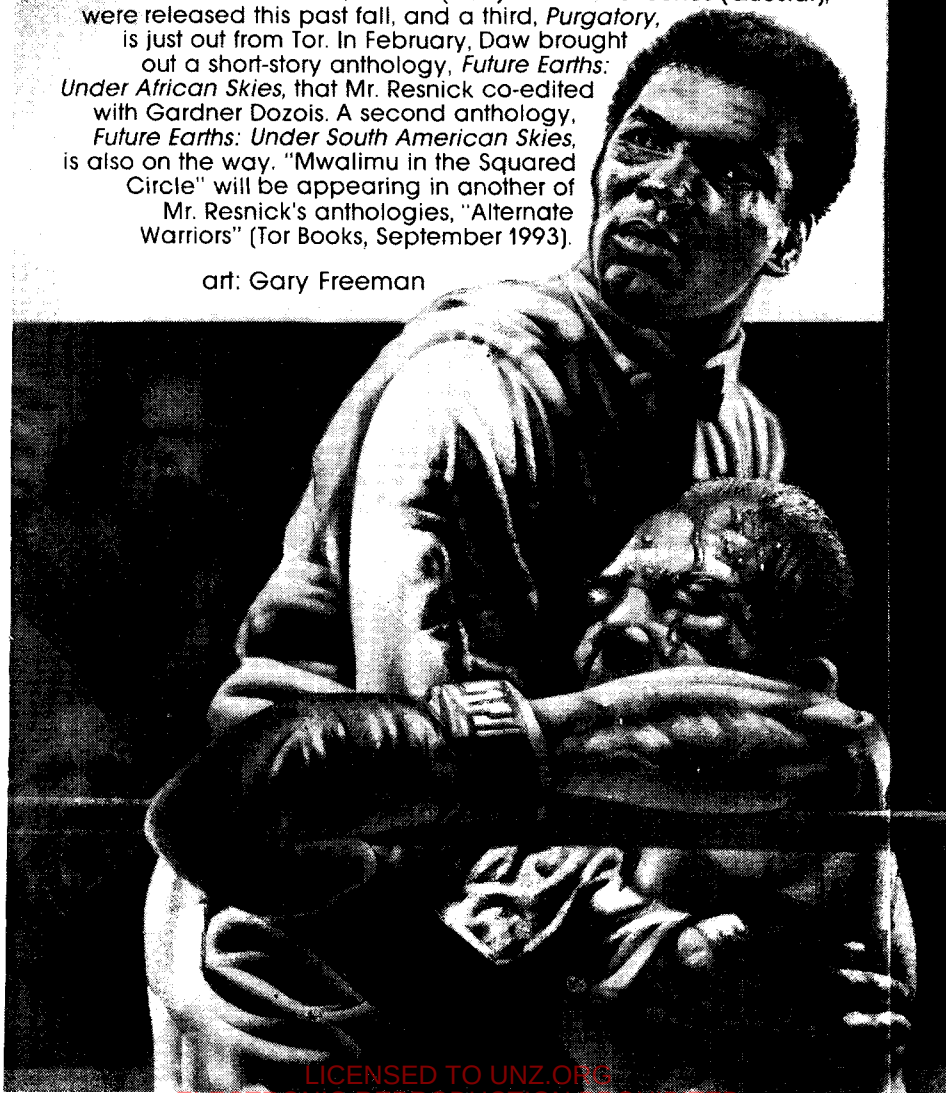
MWALIMU IN THE SQUARED CIRCLE

Mike Resnick

As usual, the author's current publishing schedule is a busy one. Two of his latest novels, *Oracle* (Ace) and *Lucifer Jones* (Questar), were released this past fall, and a third, *Purgatory,* is just out from Tor. In February, Daw brought out a short-story anthology, *Future Earths: Under African Skies,* that Mr. Resnick co-edited with Gardner Dozois. A second anthology, *Future Earths: Under South American Skies,* is also on the way. "Mwalimu in the Squared Circle" will be appearing in another of Mr. Resnick's anthologies, "Alternate Warriors" (Tor Books, September 1993).

art: Gary Freeman



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While this effort was being made, Amin postured: "I challenge President Nyerere in the boxing ring to fight it out there rather than that soldiers lose their lives on the field of battle . . . Muhammad Ali would be an ideal referee for the bout."

—George Ivan Smith
Ghosts of Kampala (1980)

As the Tanzanians began to counterattack, Amin suggested a crazy solution to the dispute. He declared that the matter should be settled in the boxing ring. "I am keeping fit so that I can challenge President Nyerere in the boxing ring and fight it out there, rather than having the soldiers lose their lives on the field of battle." Amin added that Muhammad Ali would be an ideal referee for the bout, and that he, Amin, as the former Uganda heavyweight champ, would give the small, white-haired Nyerere a sporting chance by fighting with one arm tied behind his back, and his legs shackled with weights.

—Dan Wooding and Ray Barnett
Uganda Holocaust (1980)

Nyerere looks up through the haze of blood masking his vision and sees the huge man standing over him, laughing. He looks into the man's eyes and seems to see the dark heart of Africa, savage and untamed.

He cannot remember quite what he is doing here. Nothing hurts, but as he tries to move, nothing works, either. A black man in a white shirt, a man with a familiar face, seems to be pushing the huge man away, maneuvering him into a corner. Chuckling and posturing to people that Nyerere cannot see, the huge man backs away, and now the man in the white shirt returns and begins shouting.

"Four!"

Nyerere blinks and tries to clear his head. Who is he, and why is he on his back, half-naked, and who are these other two men?

"Five!"

"Stay down, Mwalimu!" yells a voice from behind him, and now it begins to come back to him. *He* is Mwalimu.

"Six!"

He blinks again and sees the huge electronic clock above him. It is one minute and fifty-eight seconds into the first round. He is Mwalimu, and if he doesn't get up, his bankrupt country has lost the war.

"Seven!"

He cannot recall the last minute and fifty-eight seconds. In fact, he cannot recall anything since he entered the ring. He can taste his blood,

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can feel it running down over his eyes and cheeks, but he cannot remember how he came to be bleeding, or laying on his back. It is a mystery.

"Eight!"

Finally his legs are working again, and he gathers them beneath him. He does not know if they will bear his weight, but they must be doing so, for Muhammad Ali—that is his name! Ali—is cleaning his gloves off and staring into his eyes.

"You should have stayed down," whispers Ali.

Nyerere grunts an answer. He is glad that the mouthpiece is impeding his speech, for he has no idea what he is trying to say.

"I can stop it if you want," says Ali.

Nyerere grunts again, and Ali shrugs and stands aside as the huge man shuffles across the ring toward him, still chuckling.

It began as a joke. Nobody ever took anything Amin said seriously, except for his victims.

He had launched a surprise bombing raid in the north of Tanzania. No one knew why, for despite what they did in their own countries, despite what genocide they might commit, the one thing all African leaders had adhered to since Independence was the sanctity of national borders.

So Julius Nyerere, the Mwalimu, the Teacher, the President of Tanzania, had mobilized his forces and pushed Amin's army back into Uganda. Not a single African nation had offered military assistance; not a single Western nation had offered to underwrite so much as the cost of a bullet. Amin had expediently converted to Islam, and now Libya's crazed but opportunistic Quaddafi was pouring money and weapons into Uganda.

Still, Nyerere's soldiers, with their tattered uniforms and ancient rifles, were marching toward Kampala, and it seemed only a matter of time before Amin was overthrown and the war would be ended, and Milton Obote would be restored to the Presidency of Uganda. It was a moral crusade, and Nyerere was convinced that Amin's soldiers were throwing down their weapons and fleeing because they, too, know that Right was on Tanzania's side.

But while Right may have favored Nyerere, Time did not. He knew what the Western press and even the Tanzanian army did not know: that within three weeks, not only could his bankrupt nation no longer supply its men with weapons, it could not even afford to bring them back out of Uganda.

"I challenge President Nyerere in the boxing ring to fight it out there rather than that soldiers lose their lives on the field of battle. . . ."

The challenge made every newspaper in the western world, as columnist after columnist laughed over the image of the 330-pound Amin,

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former heavyweight champion of the Ugandan army, stepping into the ring to duke it out with the five-foot one-inch, 112-pound, 57-year-old Nyerere.

Only one man did not laugh: Mwalimu.

"You're crazy, you know that?"

Nyerere stares calmly at the tall, well-built man standing before his desk. It is a hot, humid day, typical of Dar es Salaam, and the man is already sweating profusely.

"I did not ask you here to judge my sanity," answers Nyerere. "But to tell me how to defeat him."

"It can't be done. You're spotting him two hundred pounds and twenty years. My job as referee is to keep him from out-and-out killing you."

"You frequently defeated men who were bigger and stronger than you," notes Nyerere gently. "And, in the latter portion of your career, younger than you as well."

"You float like a butterfly and sting like a bee," answers Ali. "But fifty-seven-year-old presidents don't float, and little bitty guys don't sting. I've been a boxer all my life. Have you ever fought anyone?"

"When I was younger," says Nyerere.

"How much younger?"

Nyerere thinks back to the sunlit day, some forty-eight years ago, when he pummeled his brother, though he can no longer remember the reason for it. In his mind's eye, both of them are small and thin and ill-nourished, and the beating amounted to two punches, delivered with barely enough force to stun a fly. The next week he acquired the gift of literacy, and he has never raised a hand in anger again. Words are far more powerful.

Nyerere sighs. "*Much* younger," he admits.

"Ain't no way," says Ali, and then repeats, "Ain't no way. This guy is not just a boxer, he's crazy, and crazy people don't feel no pain."

"How would *you* fight him?" asks Nyerere.

"Me?" says Ali. He starts jabbing the air with his left fist. "Stick and run, stick and run. Take him dancing til he drops. Man's got a lot of blubber on that frame." He holds his arms up before his face. "He catches up with me, I go into the rope-a-dope. I lean back, I take his punches on my forearms, I let him wear himself out." Suddenly he straightens up and turns back to Nyerere. "But it won't work for you. He'll break your arms if you try to protect yourself with them."

"He'll only have one arm free," Nyerere points out.

"That's all he'll need," answers Ali. "Your only shot is to keep moving, to tire him out." He frowns. "But . . . "

"But?"

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"But I ain't never seen a fifty-seven-year-old man that could tire out a man in his thirties."

"Well," says Nyerere with an unhappy shrug, "I'll have to think of something."

"Think of letting your soldiers beat the shit out of *his* soldiers," says Ali.

"That is impossible."

"I thought they were winning," said Ali.

"In fourteen days they will be out of ammunition and gasoline," answers Nyerere. "They will be unable to defend themselves and unable to retreat."

"Then give them what they need."

Nyerere shakes his head. "You do not understand. My nation is bankrupt. There is no money to pay for ammunition."

"Hell, I'll loan it to you myself," says Ali. "This Amin is a crazy man. He's giving blacks all over the world a bad name."

"That is out of the question," says Nyerere.

"You think I ain't got it?" says Ali pugnaciously.

"I am sure you are a wealthy man, and that your offer is sincere," answers Nyerere. "But even if you gave us the money, by the time we converted it and purchased what we needed it would be too late. This is the only way to save my army."

"By letting a crazy man tear you apart?"

"By defeating him in the ring before he realizes that he can defeat my men in the field."

"I've seen a lot of things go down in the squared circle," says Ali, shaking his head in disbelief, "but this is the strangest."

"You cannot do this," says Maria when she finally finds out.

"It is done," answers Nyerere.

They are in their bedroom, and he is staring out at the reflection of the moon on the Indian Ocean. As the light dances on the water, he tries to forget the darkness to the west.

"You are not a prizefighter," she says. "You are Mwalimu. No one expects you to meet this madman. The press treats it as a joke."

"I would be happy to exchange doctoral theses with him, but he insists on exchanging blows," says Nyerere wryly.

"He is illiterate," said Maria. "And the people will not allow it. You are the man who brought us independence and who has led us ever since. The people look to you for wisdom, not pugilism."

"I have never sought to live any life but that of the intellect," he admits. "And what has it brought us? While Kenyatta and Mobutu and even Kaunda have stolen hundreds of millions of dollars, we are as poor

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now as the day we were wed." He shakes his head sadly. "I stand up to oppose Amin, and only Sir Seretse Khama of Botswana, secure in his British knighthood, stands with me." He pauses again, trying to sort it out. "Perhaps the old *mzee* of Kenya was right. Grab what you can while you can. Could our army be any more ill-equipped if I had funneled aid into a Swiss account? Could I be any worse off than now, as I prepare to face this madman in"—he cannot hide his distaste—"a boxing ring?"

"You must *not* face him," insists Maria.

"I must, or the army will perish."

"Do you think he will let the army live after he has beaten you?" she asks.

Nyerere has not thought that far ahead, and now a troubled frown crosses his face.

He had come to the office with such high hopes, such dreams and ambitions. Let Kenyatta play lackey to the capitalist West. Let Machal sell his country to the Russians. Tanzania would be different, a proving ground for African socialism.

It was a dry, barren country without much to offer. There were the great game parks, the Serengeti and the Ngorongoro Crater in the north, but four-fifths of the land was infested with the tsetse fly, there were no minerals beneath the surface, Nairobi was already the capital city of East Africa and no amount of modernization to Dar es Salaam could make it competitive. There was precious little grazing land and even less water. None of this fazed Nyerere; they were just more challenges to overcome, and he had no doubt that he could shape them to his vision.

But before industrialization, before prosperity, before anything else, came education. He had gone from the bush to the presidency in a single lifetime, had translated the entire body of Shakespeare's work into Swahili, had given form and structure to his country's constitution, and he knew that before everything came literacy. While his people lived in grass huts, other men had harnessed the atom, had reached the Moon, had obliterated hundreds of diseases, all because of the written word. And so while Kenyatta became the *Mzee*, the Wise Old Man, he himself became *Mwalimu*. Not the President, not the Leader, not the Chief of Chiefs, but the Teacher.

He would teach them to turn away from the dark heart and reach for the sunlight. He created the *ujamaa* villages, based on the Israeli kibbutzim, and issued the Arusha Declaration, and channeled more than half his country's aid money into the schools. His people's bellies might not be filled, their bodies might not be covered, but they could read, and everything would follow from that.

But what followed was drought, and famine, and disease, and more

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drought, and more famine, and more disease. He went abroad and described his vision and pleaded for money; what he got were ten thousand students who arrived overflowing with idealism but devoid of funds. They meant well and they worked hard, but they had to be fed, and housed, and medicated, and when they could not mold the country into his utopia in the space of a year or two, they departed.

And then came the madman, the final nail in Tanzania's financial coffin. Nyerere labeled him for what he was, and found himself conspicuously alone on the continent. African leaders simply didn't criticize one another, and suddenly it was the Mwalimu who was the pariah, not the bloodthirsty butcher of Uganda. The East African Union, a fragile thing at best, fell apart, and while Nyerere was trying to save it, Kenyatta, the true capitalist, appropriated all three countries' funds and began printing his own money. Tanzania, already near bankruptcy, was left with money that was not honored anywhere beyond its borders.

Still, he struggled to meet the challenge. If that was the way the *Mzee* wanted to play the game, that was fine with him. He closed the border to Kenya. If tourists wanted to see his game parks, they would have to stay in *his* country; there would be no more round trips from Nairobi. If Amin wanted to slaughter his people, so be it; he would cut off all diplomatic relations, and to hell with what his neighbors thought. Perhaps it was better this way; now, with no outside influence, he could concentrate entirely on creating his utopia. It would be a little more difficult, it would take a little longer, but in the end, the accomplishment would be that much more satisfying.

And then Amin's air force dropped its bombs on Tanzania.

The insanity of it.

Nyerere ducks a roundhouse right, Amin guffaws and winks to the crowd, Ali stands back and wishes he were somewhere else.

Nyerere's vision has cleared, but blood keeps running into his left eye. The fight is barely two minutes old, and already he is gasping for breath. He can feel every beat of his heart, as if a tiny man with a hammer and chisel is imprisoned inside his chest, trying to get out.

The weights attached to Amin's ankles should be slowing him down, but somehow Nyerere finds that he is cornered against the ropes. Amin fakes a punch, Nyerere ducks, then straightens up just in time to feel the full power of the madman's fist as it smashes into his face.

He is down on one knee again, fifty-seven years old and gasping for breath. Suddenly he realizes that no air is coming in, that he is suffocating, and he thinks his heart has stopped . . . but no, he can feel it, still pounding. Then he understands: his nose is broken, and he is trying to breathe through his mouth and the mouthpiece is preventing it. He spits

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the mouthpiece out, and is mildly surprised to see that it is not covered with blood.

"Three!"

Amin, who has been standing at the far side of the ring, approaches, laughing uproariously, and Ali stops the count and slowly escorts him back to the neutral corner.

The pen is mightier than the sword. The words come, unbidden, into Nyerere's mind, and he wants to laugh. A horrible, retching sound escapes his lips, a sound so alien that he cannot believe it came from him.

Ali slowly returns to him and resumes the count.

"Four!" Stay down, you old fool, Ali's eyes seem to say.

Nyerere grabs a rope and tries to pull himself up.

"Five!" I bought you all the time I could, say the eyes, but I can't protect you if you get up again.

Nyerere gathers himself for the most difficult physical effort of his life.

"Six!" You're as crazy as *he* is.

Nyerere stands up. He hopes Maria will be proud of him, but somehow he knows that she won't.

Amin, mugging to the crowd in a grotesque imitation of Ali, moves in for the kill.

When he was a young man, the president of his class at Uganda's Makerere University, already tabbed as a future leader by his teachers and his classmates, his fraternity entered a track meet, and he was chosen to run the four-hundred-meter race.

I am no athlete, he said; I am a student. I have exams to worry about, a scholarship to obtain. I have no time for such foolishness. But they entered his name anyway, and the race was the final event of the day, and just before it began his brothers came up to him and told him that if he did not beat at least one of his five rivals, his fraternity, which held a narrow lead after all the other events, would lose.

Then you will lose, said Nyerere with a shrug.

If we do, it will be your fault, they told him.

It is just a race, he said.

But it is important to *us*, they said.

So he allowed himself to be led to the starting line, and the pistol was fired, and all six young men began running, and he found himself trailing the field, and he remained in last place all the way around the track, and when he crossed the finish wire, he found that his brothers had turned away from him.

But it was only a game, he protested later. What difference does it make who is the faster? We are here to study laws and vectors and constitutions, not to run in circles.

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It is not that you came in last, answered one of them, but that you represented us and you did not try.

It was many days before they spoke to him again. He took to running a mile every morning and every evening, and when the next track meet took place, he volunteered for the four-hundred-meter race again. He was beaten by almost thirty meters, but he came in fourth, and collapsed of exhaustion ten meters past the finish line, and the following morning he was re-elected president of his fraternity by acclamation.

There are forty-three seconds left in the first round, and his arms are too heavy to lift. Amin swings a roundhouse that he ducks, but it catches him on the shoulder and knocks him halfway across the ring. The shoulder goes numb, but it has bought him another ten seconds, for the madman cannot move fast with the weights on his ankles, probably could not move fast even without them. Besides, he is enjoying himself, joking with the crowd, talking to Ali, mugging for all the cameras at ringside.

Ali finds himself between the two men, takes an extra few seconds awkwardly extricating himself—Ali, who has never taken a false or awkward step in his life—and buys Nyerere almost five more seconds. Nyerere looks up at the clock and sees there is just under half a minute remaining.

Amin bellows and swings a blow that will crush his skull if it lands, but it doesn't, the huge Ugandan cannot balance properly with one hand tied behind his back, and he misses and almost falls through the ropes.

"Hit him now!" come the yells from Nyerere's corner.

"Kill him, Mwalimu!"

But Nyerere can barely catch his breath, can no longer lift his arms. He blinks to clear the blood from his eyes, then staggers to the far side of the ring. Maybe it will take Amin twelve or thirteen seconds to get up, spot him, reach him. If he goes down again then, he can be saved by the bell. He will have survived the round. He will have run the race.

Vectors. Angles. The square of the hypotenuse. It's all very intriguing, but it won't help him become a leader. He opts for law, for history, for philosophy.

How was he to know that in the long run they were the same?

He sits in his corner, his nostrils propped open, his cut man working on his eye. Ali comes over and peers intently at him.

"He knocks you down once more, I gotta call it off," he says.

Nyerere tries to answer through battered lips. It is unintelligible. Just as well; for all he knows, he was trying to say, "Please do."

Ali leans closer and lowers his voice.

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"It's not just a sport, you know. It's a science, too."

Nyerere utters a questioning croak.

"You run, he's gonna catch you," continues Ali. "A ring ain't a big enough place to hide in."

Nyerere stares at him dully. What is the man trying to say?

"You gotta close with him, grab him. Don't give him room to swing. You do that, maybe I won't have to go to your funeral tomorrow."

Vectors, angles, philosophy, all the same when you're the Mwalimu and you're fighting for your life.

The lion, some four hundred pounds of tawny fury, pulls down the one-ton buffalo.

The hundred-pound hyena runs him off his kill.

The twenty-pound jackal winds up eating it.

And Nyerere clinches with the madman, hangs on for dear life, feels the heavy blows raining down on his back and shoulders, grabs tighter. Ali separates them, positions himself near Amin's right hand so that he can't release the roundhouse, and Nyerere grabs the giant again.

His head is finally clear. The fourth round is coming up, and he hasn't been down since the first. He still can't catch his breath, his legs will barely carry him to the center of the ring, and the blood is once again trickling into his eyes. He looks at the madman, who is screaming imprecations to his seconds, his chest and belly rising and falling.

Is Amin tiring? Does it matter? Nyerere still hasn't landed a single blow. Could even a hundred blows bring the Ugandan to his knees? He doubts it.

Perhaps he should have bet on the fight. The odds were thousands to one that he wouldn't make it this far. He could have supplied his army with the winnings, and died honorably.

It is not the same, he decides, as they rub his shoulders, grease his cheeks, apply ice to the swelling beneath his eye. He has survived the fourth round, has done his best, but it is not the same. He could finish fourth out of six in a foot race and be re-elected, but if he finishes second tonight, he will not have a country left to re-elect him. This is the real world, and surviving, it seems, is not as important as winning.

Ali tells him to hold on, his corner man tells him to retreat, the cut man tells him to protect his eye, but no one tells him how to *win*, and he realizes that he will have to find out on his own.

Goliath fell to a child. Even Achilles had his weakness. What must he do to bring the madman down?

* * *

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He is crazy, this Amin. He revels in torture. He murders his wives. Rumor has it that he has even killed and eaten his infant son. How do you find weakness in a barbarian like that?

And suddenly, Nyerere realizes, you do it by realizing that he *is* a barbarian—ignorant, illiterate, superstitious.

There is no time now, but he will hold that thought, he will survive one more round of clinching and grabbing, of stifling closeness to the giant whose very presence he finds degrading.

Three more minutes of the sword, and then he will apply the pen.

He almost doesn't make it. Halfway through the round Amin shakes him off like a fly, then lands a right to the head as he tries to clinch again.

Consciousness begins to ebb from him, but by sheer force of will he refuses to relinquish it. He shakes his head, spits blood on the floor of the ring, and stands up once more. Amin lunges at him, and once again he wraps his small, spindly arms around the giant.

"A snake," he mumbles, barely able to make himself understood.

"A snake?" asks the cornerman.

"Draw it on my glove," he says, forcing the words out with an excruciating effort.

"Now?"

"Now," mutters Nyerere.

He comes out for the seventh round, his face a mask of raw, bleeding tissue. As Amin approaches him, he spits out his mouthpiece.

"As I strike, so strikes the snake," he whispers. "Protect your heart, madman." He repeats it in his native Zanake dialect, which the giant thinks is a curse.

Amin's eyes go wide with terror, and he hits the giant on the left breast.

It is the first punch he has thrown in the entire fight, and Amin drops to his knees, screaming.

"One!"

Amin looks down at his unblemished chest and pendulous belly, and seems surprised to find himself still alive and breathing.

"Two!"

Amin blinks once, then chuckles.

"Three!"

The giant gets to his feet, and approaches Nyerere.

"Try again," he says, loud enough for ringside to hear. "Your snake has no fangs."

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He puts his hand on his hip, braces his legs, and waits.

Nyerere stares at him for an instant. So the pen is *not* mightier than the sword. Shakespeare might have told him so.

"I'm waiting!" bellows the giant, mugging once more for the crowd.

Nyerere realizes that it is over, that he will die in the ring this night, that he can no more save his army with his fists than with his depleted treasury. He has fought the good fight, has fought it longer than anyone thought he could. At least, before it is over, he will have one small satisfaction. He feints with his left shoulder, then puts all of his strength into one final effort, and delivers a right to the madman's groin.

The air rushes out of Amin's mouth with a *woosh!* and he doubles over, then drops to his knees.

Ali pushes Nyerere into a neutral corner, then instructs the judges to take away a point from him on their scorecards.

They can take away a point, Nyerere thinks, but they can't take away the fact that I met him on the field of battle, that I lasted more than six rounds, that the giant went down twice. Once before the pen, once before the sword.

And both were ineffective.

Even a Mwalimu can learn one last lesson, he decides, and it is that sometimes even vectors and philosophy aren't enough. We must find another way to conquer Africa's dark heart, the madness that pervades this troubled land. I have shown those who will follow me the first step; I have stood up to it, faced it without flinching. It will be up to someone else, a wiser Mwalimu than myself, to learn how to overcome it. I have done my best, I have given my all, I have made the first dent in its armor. Rationality cannot always triumph over madness, but it must stand up and be counted, as I have stood up. They cannot ask any more of me.

Finally at peace with himself, he prepares for the giant's final assault. ●

THE SURFACE OF VENUS

Glows a dull brick-red
a surface of sterile baked rock under
still, unbreathable black
sulfuric acid air
yes, it's the planet of love, all right.

—Geoffrey A. Landis

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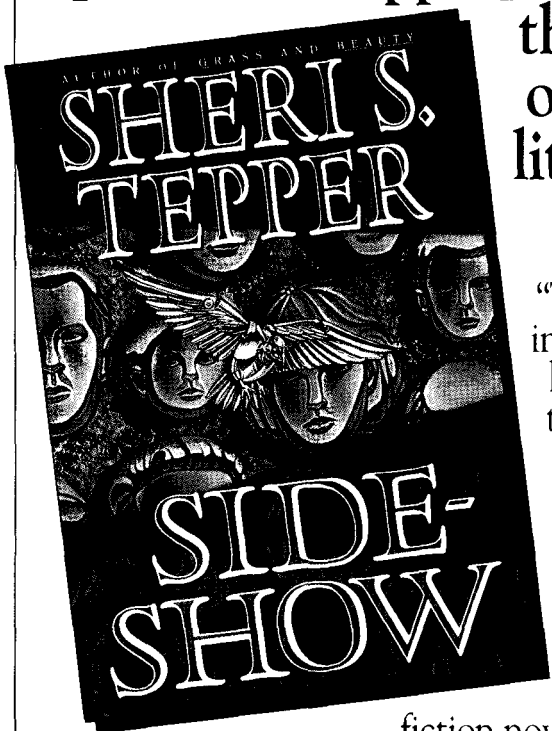
"[Sheri S. Tepper] is one of the greats of human literature."
–Analog



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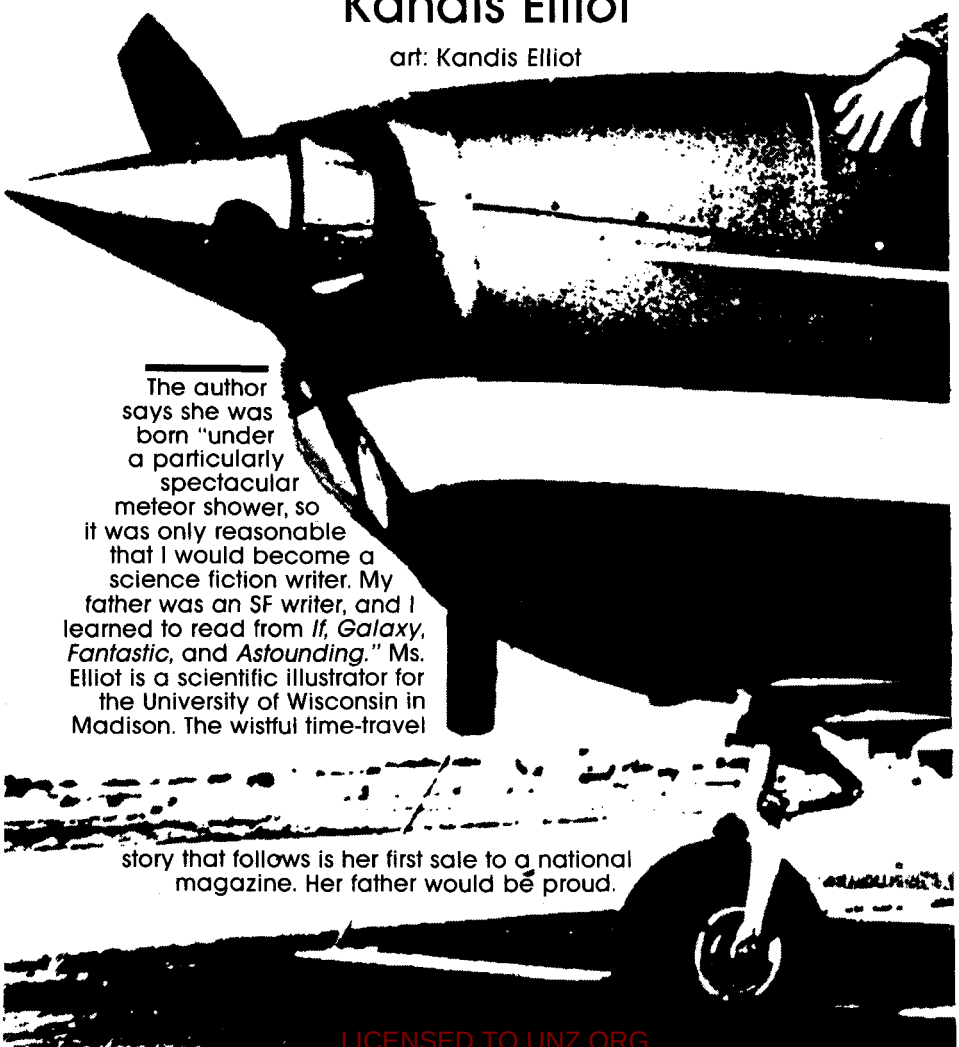
DRIVING THE CHEVY BISCAYNE TO OBLIVION

Kandis Elliot

art: Kandis Elliot



The author says she was born "under a particularly spectacular meteor shower, so it was only reasonable that I would become a science fiction writer. My father was an SF writer, and I learned to read from *If, Galaxy, Fantastic,* and *Astounding.*" Ms. Elliot is a scientific illustrator for the University of Wisconsin in Madison. The wistful time-travel story that follows is her first sale to a national magazine. Her father would be proud.

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I knew that the time for my drive to oblivion had come when I saw my old white '65 Chevy Biscayne in the driveway.

She hadn't been there last night. Probably just flashed into being a moment ago when my back was turned as I locked the front door. I wasn't too surprised, though, for in my heart of hearts I'd always known that the moment, like I'd seen it for my father and his brother, would come for me, too.

She'd been an auction car. Uncle Jacob bid on her for me—way back in '69, ten years before his fatal heart attack—and let me have her at cost. Two hundred dollars. White coupe, red upholstered interior, standard transmission with a three-speed shift on the steering column. No car I ever owned since had any of those things—white, red, three-on-the-tree.

And here they were waiting for me again. I strolled around her, taking a moment to admire the car's happy face. Chevys of that era always had a smile, or so it seemed to me, their headlight eyes cheerful, a grin along the black rubber teeth projecting from their chrome bumpers. The rising June sun glinted softly along the Chevy's huge rear fenders, streamlined like jet cones. Big round taillights added to the blasting-off effect. She'd been a mid-sized car in '65. Compared to today's little tin-can clones where you can't tell a T-Bird from a Toyota, she was a tank.

I didn't get in yet, just savored the moment. The gate of transcendence would not swing wide again; and once I drove through it to oblivion, the *me* who was left behind, who would go to the office and come back to the low-fat/high-fiber one-martini supper and who would die years hence like Dad and Jacob, complaisant and empty-eyed—that creature wouldn't be one for reminiscing.

The Biscayne was white because at seventeen I hadn't had a choice; it was the only decent auction car I could afford. My father had taken an immediate dislike to her the first time I drove the Chevy back to the farm. He thought that white cars were camouflaged against snow and begged for head-on collisions on winter highways. White cars didn't do much for Uncle Jacob, either, for strictly business reasons. White wasn't a money color. Dark blue had the best resale value. Paint a white car dark blue, and you could add another hundred dollars to the tag.

In those days I'd been a driver for Uncle Jacob; I learned that what he said was true, at least about cars (his airplanes had all been white). After he'd given up flying, Jacob ran a one-man auto body shop, and he'd branched out into the used-car business on a small scale. We'd go to the auto auctions in Dyer, Indiana, just over the Illinois border and a four-hour drive from Wisconsin, to pick up "decent" cars—southern ones without rust or engines blown by cold winter starts, fairly good cars that just needed a little bodywork. He'd fix their dings, tune their engines, make 'em look like they were worth a couple hundred dollars over book. Then

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he'd either add a car to his lot inventory of five or ten, or for a faster, if lesser, profit, take it back to the auction. Usually he had a couple of trade-ins to take down, beaters, and he would hire me to drive one of them for five hundred dollars and lunch. (The auction's noon feed for dealers was free for their drivers, too, if the dealer had bought a car the week previous.)

We'd leave at five on a Saturday morning and get back about midnight. Two kinds of dealers came to auctions: new-car guys who ran their trade-ins and demos through the lines, and used-car guys who bought 'em. All the cars went at prices that would knock socks off the folks who bought from small lots, thinking they'd scotched a deal on a honey. Even if a particular car *was* a honey, you can be sure the dealer made a fat profit. Dealers had all kinds of crafty ways to be cheap in bringing an auction car back to life, at least until the check was written. I loved 'em for it.

Coming into Dyer, Uncle Jacob would stop at Elvin's Fill 'Er Up, the gas station just down the block from the auction barn, and pour a can of STP into the crankcase. STP quieted old engines like magic; sometimes Jacob himself got taken in by the same trick. We never filled 'er up with gas, however. Dealers could estimate *exactly* how much to put in the tank to get the car to the auction and no further. Before me and Jacob returned to Wisconsin with a new auction car, we always had to make another stop at Elvin's—one mere block out of the gate, mind—and sometimes we'd run out of gas before we got there.

On the auction lot I'd always watch the dealers check out the cars, revving up the engines, estimating a car's life of misuse by its sound and the color of the tailpipe smoke. After listening to valves and belts and kicking tires—the auction's classiest year-end demos rolled through bidding lanes on the world's baldest tires—the dealers would walk around a car and their careful eyes would follow the shine of the sun on its paint, looking for the telltale ripple that bespoke extensive body work and hence a bent frame. Darker the car, the easier to see it. Bodywork done on a black car stuck out like a sore thumb. The only dark paint not immediately suspect was blue, the selling color.

I never could explain why white sold worse on the home lot than *any* dark hue. I'd always doubted Dad's snow theory about white cars and figured perhaps folks disliked dark blue *least* of all colors, a banker's color, safe, in that bringing home a dark blue used car wouldn't start the groans and arguments that, say, a brown, or heaven-forbid red one might. Also, white was associated with sports cars, Corvettes and Jaguars and their ilk, or cars like Caddys that make a statement about their owners. Nobody in his heart of hearts can really ever put up with the type of personality that insists on driving a flashy car.

But in August of '69, as a favor to me, Uncle Jacob bid two hundred

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dollars on a white '65 Chevy Biscayne that would have brought maybe four hundred on the lot, five-fifty, painted dark blue. (In 1969 you could buy a brand new Volkswagen beetle for fifteen hundred. Ten grand got you an Eldorado, loaded.)

More than once my uncle wished out loud, rather wistfully, that he could love a car the way I did that Biscayne. Maybe it was because Jacob never liked the creatures of his trade. Or disliked them, I don't mean it like that. He might have held deep-seated suspicions that they all were dead-set on blowing an engine on him over the clay pit on the Calumet Expressway, but I don't think he ever held any loftier emotion for cars, certainly nothing like what he felt for airplanes.

That just-business attitude surprised me. My father once made his living with horses the way Uncle Jacob did with cars, and even after he'd gone into dairy, Dad had been anything but indifferent to horses. They'd been his whole *life*.

I drove that Biscayne for several years and had the standard coming-of-age adventures with her, driving to and from high school and then college classes, to and from summer work at the canning factory, liaisons with drive-ins and back-seat sex, Sunday trips to local beaches, Fridays to beer bars and, always, those Saturday mornings to Jacob's Auto Body to pick up a beater for the auction. The Chevy sucked a quart of non-detergent oil every two hundred miles (detergent oil cleaned the gunk out of the engine and made her leak worse); her radiator'd boil over three times a summer with a smell of cooking cabbage; her springs would bottom out under a load of teenagers when we popped over train tracks doing ninety; after a windstorm she got her differential jammed on a tree branch I thought she would clear and made me crawl under her with a howling chainsaw; she backfired so loudly one quiet winter morning that I was convinced the engine had exploded and wouldn't go near her until my father came up from the barn to see why I hadn't left for school yet. After the Chevy rolled over a hundred thousand miles, both my Uncle Jacob and my father kept warning me she was going to blow her engine, she needed a valve job, she was going to nickel-and-dime me to death, that sort of thing. Eventually I was persuaded to take her back to Dyer and the auction.

At the time, it wasn't a hard thing to do. After all, as a driver for a car dealer I'd probably driven more cars by the time I turned twenty-five than any dozen people ever would in their lifetimes. And at the auctions I'd pick up another ten bucks driving the cars through the barn, past the auctioneers. There'd be five or so of us drivers, depending on how many lanes (company cars, police cars, new demonstrators, all had their own lanes), and we'd jump in a lot car, race it to the in-line, wait until someone waved us up to the block, sit there hoping the car wouldn't run out of

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gas while the auctioneer shouted *real sharp car good clean car got us a honey here* and we'd rev the engine when someone pointed to the hood, then she'd be bought-or-naught and someone would pound on the trunk and we'd gun her back to the lot and jump in the next one in line, and so on. I got to know a great many makes and models in this way, so for me a new car wasn't something to get worked up about, and besides, when you're thinking about your second car, it's easy to overlook the bonds you've formed to the first.

When the Chevy Biscayne went back through, she was almost just another car.

She went for twenty-five bucks, and Jacob chuckled abut skinning the dealer who'd bought her. For a long time we all joked that she was probably running dope in some Motown ghetto. A few years after that I'd gotten my degree and my own profession and never drove for Uncle Jacob again. Since Jacob's health had remained as robust as it'd been during his Flying Fortress days, his fatal heart attack surprised everyone. I was even more surprised when I started crying as I stood over his casket. Just started to howl, couldn't stop, and even weirder, I felt as though I were existing outside of myself, watching the outburst and just as uncomfortable about it as Jacob's wife, Aunt Anna, hovering awkwardly beside me. As soon as I turned away I was all right. I'd never shed a tear for Jacob before or since. To this day I can't figure it.

I didn't get nostalgic about the Chevy until years later, when I started to notice that whenever I looked for cars to buy, the first thing I checked for was if they had three-on-the-tree. None ever did.

So when today came and the time for my drive to oblivion along with it, I was well pleased to see the Chevy Biscayne resurrected in my driveway just like I remembered her (which was doubtlessly better than she ever was in reality); and when I finally poked my head in through the open driver's window, the first thing I checked for, before the bench seats covered in that worn red sofa upholstery or the red dash or red steering wheel, was that shiny chrome shift sticking out from the column.

The keys were in the ignition. I got in and cranked her, pumping lots of gas like I always had to. She fired right up. A belch of blue smoke fogged mosquitoes all across the front lawn. I knew without checking that today the Chevy's oil level was full; so was her gas tank. From now on they would always be full, just like the radiator would never freeze or overheat, all eight cylinders would spark with four-barrel power, the old bald tires would never go flat. I just sat for a moment, savoring the feel and sound and smell of her. It'd been over thirty years, yet the seat fit as comfortably as it had when I'd first parked a seventeen-year-old's skinny butt there. The steering wheel was coated with familiar grit, because my hands had always been a little dirty with non-detergent

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engine oil, Trans-Medic, radiator Stop-Leak or STP. I'd forgotten she had a steering wheel ball so I could crank that wheel around and around—you had to really crank in the days before power steering. Nothing hung from the rear-view mirror. I'd rejected fuzzy dice back in '69 because they were part of a minor '50's revival, and every manjack in creation had fuzzy dice then. I'd get 'em now if I could.

While I sat there and let car memories flood my head, my gaze drifted a final time over the door of my attached garage directly ahead, over my neatly-mowed, Weeded & Feeded lawn off to the side, finally rose to my split-level three-bedroom house. I was filled with a sensation of *not-right*ness. The Chevy had been an auction car and a farm car and a college car and a seventeen-year-old's first car. I'd driven her across that chaotic, suspended, free-living bridge which spans from the contracted world of childhood into the chains of adulthood. She'd never been in this drive or parked in front of that house, or belonged to the *me* who had inhabited this place up until ten minutes ago, and the two realities grated irritatingly on each other.

It was time to go.

I looked around for any last thing I should do. I noticed that I'd tossed my briefcase on the passenger seat, just as I'd have done getting in my regular car, still in the garage, to go to work. I heaved the briefcase out of the window. Couldn't have done that in my little piece-of-trash Hyundai, I thought, with its little trashy windows. I looked at the front door of the house where I'd just gulped breakfast because I'd been late. Nope, they'd already started, all those events that were necessary for my drive, and today I didn't have to pack anything or call clients or check to see if the stove was off and the door locked. I wouldn't be back.

I put the Chevy in reverse—lovingly, enjoying every arthritic rise and fall of that wonderful column shift; carefully, because the worn rods sometimes jammed if I was sloppy shifting—backed down the drive and into the street and headed for the highway.

No dream car was more satisfying to drive than that Biscayne. Hogging the empty asphalt and bounding on worn shocks like a ship on a swelled sea, we flowed down winding highway 89 to 73 to Deerfield to Edgerton. I draped my right wrist over the shift lever and watched the rolling hills of southern Wisconsin flow on back behind me. It was the best leg of the journey to Dyer. The rural countryside was picturesque with rich dairy farms, corn and tobacco sprouted from black soil, Holsteins grazed alongside an occasional kid's horse, usually neglected in favor of Harleys and small-town taverns. Occasionally I'd pass the Piper Cub airports of crop dusters.

I could only glance at the horses, because their eyes all looked so sad

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to me. It wasn't that I was driving a car, the invention that had opened the gates to their own oblivion. It just seemed to me that the horses *knew*, that they'd retained some realization of their own time of transcendence, when their spirits walked off and left them stranded in a world not really meaningful for them any more. I didn't look at the horses, but for the same reason I'd keep the airports in sight as long as I could, as a tribute to my Uncle Jacob.

Uncle Jacob got Dad up in a plane once. A biplane, one in which Jacob particularly delighted because of its maneuverability. It had taken quite a bit of urging to get my father into it, years of coaxing, in fact. Although Dad really did want to fly in a plane just once to see what it was like, I think his long hesitation was precisely because he knew what was forthcoming if he ever got into a plane with his brother. As expected, Jacob gave him the works. Barrel rolls, upside-down, roller-coaster ascents to stall-out, rocket descents to pull-out just feet above the plowed fields, and a double barnstorm through the tobacco shed and back, raising just ever-loving hell with the tobacco sheaves curing in there. When they got back on the ground, Dad was predictably green and stayed that way for days. He couldn't even sit in a rocking chair. Of course he never set foot in an airplane again, but you can be certain he never once asked Jacob for mercy during the ride.

My father had been a horseman, a real one, raised in a livery and grown up on horse drives. During the twenties and thirties he drove herds up from East Texas for Madison's Boy Scout camps around Lake Mendota. The horses were wild broomtails, and Dad and his crew had to break them before the boys arrived. First the horses would be tied tight to the corral posts until they choked themselves down and learned they couldn't fight a halter. The men would slap a blanket at a horse until he learned not to fear movement and men's things. Then the horse would wear a saddle for a few days, getting used to that, and all the while the cowboys would go up and lean on him, put their weight on the horse's back, walk around him, and so on. When the time came to break the horses for riding, most of the action was limited to a few bucks and a wild dash, until the animal realized nothing was going to hurt him, nor was anything he did going to get rid of the man on his back. In a month, ten men could tame one hundred broomtails. Their breaking had none of the rodeo-style, furious bucking glamorized in films. That sort of activity jammed horses' knees and my father hated rodeos for that reason, knowing the bucking horses were being crippled and would have to be put down in just two or three years. Dad's broomtails worked as good, healthy mounts for two and three decades.

The horse drives were springtime events. The rest of the year Dad and

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his father and uncles ran the town livery. Horses were still boarded and rented for riding and working up through about 1940, but after that it was all cars. Jacob, fifteen years younger than Dad, never worked in the livery or did anything with horses. His first interest was airplanes, and he never had to step across that boundary where on one side were horses and cowboys and liveries, and on the other side, cars and planes and eventually television and atomic bombs and men walking on the Moon.

When we got to Edgerton, I took I-90 and headed south to Beloit. Instead of going straight through for the Illinois tollway, I took a diversion to the Rock County Airport, where I pulled the Chevy way up to the tarmac and just looked at the airplanes there for a while. It was almost nine, and the towers were sparkling with sun. All the big planes waiting for take-off or just landed and parked by their terminals were sprinkled with colored running lights barely visible against the glare. There were no planes in the air or taxiing down the runways. I saw no movement anywhere, save for the blinking of the airplanes' lights. After fifteen minutes I turned around and drove back through the parking lot full of waiting cars. The Chevy purred happily onto the quiet interstate, and we were off for Illinois.

All Dad's relatives not involved in the livery had dairy farms, and during the Depression, when the banks were relieving Wisconsin farmers of their cows and barns and homes and land, Dad took over a pretty, four-hundred acre spread bounded by the Crawfish river. It had been his cousin's farm. The day after a letter came from the bank, the cousin had gone out to the orchard, put his squirrel gun in his mouth and blew the back of his head away. My father and a few other relatives and neighbors came in to keep the cows milked and the livestock fed, and eventually Dad, who could see handwriting on the wall about the future of the livery business, eased himself into dairy, where he could still keep a few horses.

This was in the thirties. Many farmers plowed small acreages with horses and almost all kept a team for chores like pulling stumps, checking fencelines, or hauling cow feed from the mill. As one decade followed another, farmers had tractors and trucks, too, and the day came when you looked around and you didn't see horses in the pastures any more.

Dad's last two lived long enough for me to remember them. King and Queenie were huge draft horses, Suffolk crosses, bronzy-gold with cream-colored manes, hock feathers that hid their hooves, and long milky tails that Dad tied into knots to keep from dragging on the barn floor. Both standing well over twenty hands high, Queenie weighed a ton and a quarter and King went 2800 pounds in his prime. I measured my childhood against them; until I was six I could walk straight under Queenie,

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and my seventh birthday was marked by having to duck, for the first time, under King.

Like all draft horses they were born gentle and willing to work, and Dad had no fears about my climbing all around and over them, doing my schoolwork on their broad backs, crying into their briskets when some miscommunication occurred between me and parents or siblings. Even King, who remained a stallion and had testicles like field cantaloupes, was trustworthy enough to take to town and have cars and idiot children rush around him while we loaded the wagons with sacks of cracked corn. Dad loved to take him out when city relatives or town ladies came to the farm. He'd tell the stories about bringing broomtails up from Texas, of how horses were really broke to saddle, and get into arguments with older folks about where the livery was located before it was on Ludding-ton Street and before it burned down. He'd give King a few little punches to make him stand proud, lift his knotted tail, bob his head and show off. At nearly forty-five, King was just as impressive as he'd been at ten,

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when he attracted the admiration of men who knew horses and walked from long distances with their mares.

During these showing-off sessions King would invariably get a tremendous erection, his penis as long and thick and black as the foreleg of a riding horse. I always looked forward to the moment. It seemed to be a joke Dad and King would play on the audience, the ladies not quite able to keep their eyes diverted and the men trying to erase embarrassed grins, and Dad and King pretending they didn't know anything about it. As a little kid I didn't understand quite why people reacted the way they did. I couldn't put any more significance to a horse's hard-on than I could to a hen's laying an egg. It was just something funny that happened. Nowadays the memory of that monstrous organ seems rather staggering, especially when I make the connection between it and Queenie's every-other-year foals, up until she got too old.

They'd both been foaled sometime before World War I. Queenie, I think, was older; in the summer of 1959 she'd been showing ribs and her eyes were sunken the day she tripped in the cow gutter and broke her neck. I didn't see it happen, only her lying there waiting for the knacker. The twist of her neck made the muscles bulge grotesquely, and I thought it must have been very painful. That's a kid's way of thinking—on one hand knowing that something is dead, on the other not *really* understanding at all. I think that's what it's like with animals, too, at least smart ones like horses. From his box stall King watched Queenie get dragged on the knacker's wagon, and his ears were pricked and his eyes didn't blink and he stood there quiet and still. He knew something was wrong; nonetheless he seemed to be waiting for Queenie to get out of the wagon and walk back into the barn. Had that happened, neither King nor I would have been too surprised.

Five days later, Dad went out for the morning milking and found the barn door flat and splintered on the ground and the box stall's iron rails just shoved aside like they were nothing more than licorice whips. He followed King's turkey-platter shoeprints out toward the pasture, and wouldn't let me come along. Nor would he let me go see, an hour later when he came back and said King was dead. The neighbor kids told me later that the big horse was just lying there in the pasture near the river, looking like he'd simply laid down to sleep the summer morning away.

Just past Beloit and the Wisconsin state line I was really tempted to take the Northwest Tollway through Chicago and visit O'Hare, but since I'd already stopped to rubberneck airplanes, I stuck to our old, familiar route. Jacob, tight as he was, always looked for roads that got around the toll booths. I didn't have to worry about tolls today; the Biscayne simply rolled through them—the booths were empty and their gates up.

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Nonetheless, after the first one I turned off on Cherry Valley Road, just as we'd always done. A roundabout country road, getting citified but still interesting, Cherry Valley also had a lot of small airports, and of course I couldn't pass a one without giving it a nod for Uncle Jacob.

Large airports with their DC-10s and Boeing 747s looming too big to imagine floating in the sky; little airports with their single orange windsock flying over a two-plane barn at the end of a short-mowed hay field—when Jacob and I were driving to the car auctions I'd watch his eyes turn toward every airport and its planes. If no planes were visible he'd see the aura of airplanes there. He'd piloted a Flying Fortress over Germany's ball-bearing factories in 1944. When he came back from the war all his stories were about B-17s and P-40s and Spitfires. If he mentioned the carpet bombing of Berlin or the fireballs that had been Goering's 109s, it was in terms of aviation—how the flaps jumped as the bomb bays opened, or why a tailless plane spins counter-clockwise on its last dive to the ground.

Although he never loved cars the way he did planes, he took that same depersonalized focus into his auto-body business. Even as he scraped brains off the dashboards of teenagers' cars, his concern was over the color of the paint and how much body work the car would need. He'd buy the wrecks for ten dollars, about what they were worth as scrap. Sometimes the cars weren't that bad; the parents just didn't want the car around. Jacob knew exactly how much work a car needed to profit by it, or whether it was too far gone and had to join his parts collection out in the weeds. If the car had potential, he'd pull the engine, replace the bumper and windshield, pound out the dings, and paint it dark blue. After he'd removed hairy pieces of skull, old beer bottles, the wayward shoe or comb and other leftovers of a car's previous occupants, my Aunt Anna would finish cleaning the interior, brush up the seats, wash the floor mats, and so on. I'd end up driving the car to Dyer, Indiana. After the auction it would go to a southern lot and be sold to someone—most likely another teenager—who didn't know its history.

Uncle Jacob wasn't flying planes anymore when I started working for him. He'd talk about them occasionally when we were riding together, but he wouldn't talk about airplanes the way he'd look at airplanes when we passed airports of any size. His dare-deviling turned Aunt Anna into a basket case, and she'd made him choose between her and flying. He'd given up flying. That's how I heard the story, that plain with no details. It happened after Jacob had taken Dad for that wild ride. When Jacob came up to the house, Anna'd met him at the door with her bags packed. I guess no one had ever seen her so mad before or since. I often wondered what really happened, whether there'd been a knock-down drag-out argument, or a weepy scene with shrieks and threats, or just a quiet, no-nonsense, them-or-me ultimatum. Whatever it was, Jacob had never so

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much as touched an airplane again. Only his eyes lusted and caressed, every time we passed an airport. When he came back to earth and car lots, his gaze grew spiritless again.

Toward ten-thirty in the morning I was passing through Aurora and starting to feel hungry. The old greasy spoon where Jacob and I would sometimes stop for coffee and pie was just outside of town; when I got to it I pulled the Chevy into the six-car parking lot and sat there for a minute, looking it all over. The big old American elm shaded the whole building again. In 1971 that tree had been the last one in Aurora to catch the blight and die. Everyone had been hoping it would be spared, being way on the outskirts. The restaurant's windows—the kind making up the whole front of the building and divided into a jillion little panes—were plastered with taped-up signs announcing Ho-Made banana creme pie, meatloaf specials, truckers welcome and so on, and Coca-Cola (not "Classic" or "Cherry" or any of those mutations). A big metal sign declared *Air Conditioned* as though that was the newest, most astonishing invention of the century.

I almost could've sat there the livelong day. After a while I wasn't hungry anymore, and I backed the Chevy out onto the road and continued down 30 to Calumet.

After King died, my father didn't volunteer old stories about when horses were a big part of the world of men. He'd talk about it if you brought it up, and identify shadowed faces in old photos of the livery or the cowboys who herded Boy Scout camp broomtails, but as the years went along his hand would brush "that stuff" away and he'd try to direct the conversation to politics, which he never understood. All us kids went off to town jobs or to college, so when Dad reached sixty-five he sold the cows and the equipment and rented out the land to the neighbors, and then just sat down in his chair. At first we all wondered how he was ever going to stand retirement, with no animals around, no chores, no crops to seed or harvest. Once I suggested he raise a few horses, that people were taking an interest in horses again these days and a small boarding stable would be a good enterprise for him. Dad didn't say anything one way or another, but he reached for his pipe and meditated for a while and I thought I detected a passing gleam in his eye. Nothing ever happened. For the next eight years he sat in his chair and watched television and smoked his pipe until his emphysema got too bad, and when he couldn't walk anymore he took to his bed. We finally had to put him in the old folks' home, and he lasted another nine months there, surprising everyone.

In his heart of hearts, Dad had died the same day as King. He'd still

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been a man when he'd followed a big horse's shoeprints down into the pasture, but he was already a phantom when he'd come back up to tell us the horse was dead. King had been an extension of time, a little finger of an era gone by that poked into the future far beyond its own oblivion. So was Dad, but the problem was that humans just can't commit suicide by sheer will, like animals can.

The Calumet clay pit is an astonishing sight. The pit started out on the south side of the road, I don't know when, but the first time me and Jacob drove past, it seemed hundreds of yards across and nearly as deep. Don't know really what they were digging out of it either, but it looked like clay to me. Then one year we noticed that earth movers had started chewing on the north side of the highway, and by my last season of driving, the road had been nearly floating down the center of a great, gray crater. Big trucks and cranes and graders looked like tiny little Crackerjack toys at the bottom of that immense hemisphere; people down there seemed nothing more than motes speckling the insides of our eyeballs. I'd always wanted a longer look, but there was no way to even slow down, much less stop. Back then, with mechanical dinosaurs eating away under both sides of the expanse, drivers' feet got real heavy and traffic sped across that short, tenuous, endangered span like ants on sun-hot barbed wire. It was the surprise: if you hadn't been across it before, you didn't expect it because you couldn't see it coming. Your car was abruptly funneled from an expressway with no exits except straight ahead; the highway embankments and the last overhead Oasis hid the chasm from view until *wup* there it was, opening up right under you at 70 miles per hour. By the time the thrill hit you, you were across, onto a wider road with a whole choice of exits draining traffic every which way and out of sight.

This time across there was no traffic. I passed under the Oasis—it was an Oasis again, not a plastic Mickey D's—and the instant I funneled out onto the four-laner crossing the clay pit, I took my foot off the gas (gas tank was still full, by the way) and let the Chevy Biscayne coast in neutral. She rolled to a stop right smack in the middle of the span. For the first time since I pulled out of my driveway that morning, I got out of the car.

Dad and King, I'm sure, are back at the livery and entertaining mares and gentlemen and talking horseflesh and Texas drives, and if Uncle Jacob isn't barnstorming, he's in that Flying Fortress somewhere, dropping bombs as some aeronautic exercise, not to hit any specific target. The targets and their lives held no more substance for him than law school and mortgage payments held for me. Flying was the only thing his heart had ever really taken root in.

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It wasn't quite noon. I had lots of time. Only a few easy miles to go, and moreover the auction's free-for-buyers luncheon always delayed things so that the lines never got started until one-thirty. The old sun beat down, down, into that clay pit, probably on fossils of ferns and fish that hadn't seen the light of day in sixty million years. I could smell the sweet, marshy heat waves that were coming up and making the far horizons of the pit waver and unfocus. I had shut the Chevy off; except for a little contraction ping every now and again from her cooling engine, the day was silent and still. Time had stopped dead right there, not going forward, not going backward, and I've sometimes wondered since if I wasn't being offered a choice just then, to go back to my Hyundai and my three-bedroom on my Weeded-and-Feeded lawn and to a world that didn't make any more cars with three-on-the-tree. All I did was lean against the Chevy, turn my face up at the sun and squeeze my eyes shut, and let my heart of hearts soar into the light. Then I hopped back in and took 30 to the Indiana state line, and right across it was Dyer. ●

NEXT ISSUE

(Continued from page 65)

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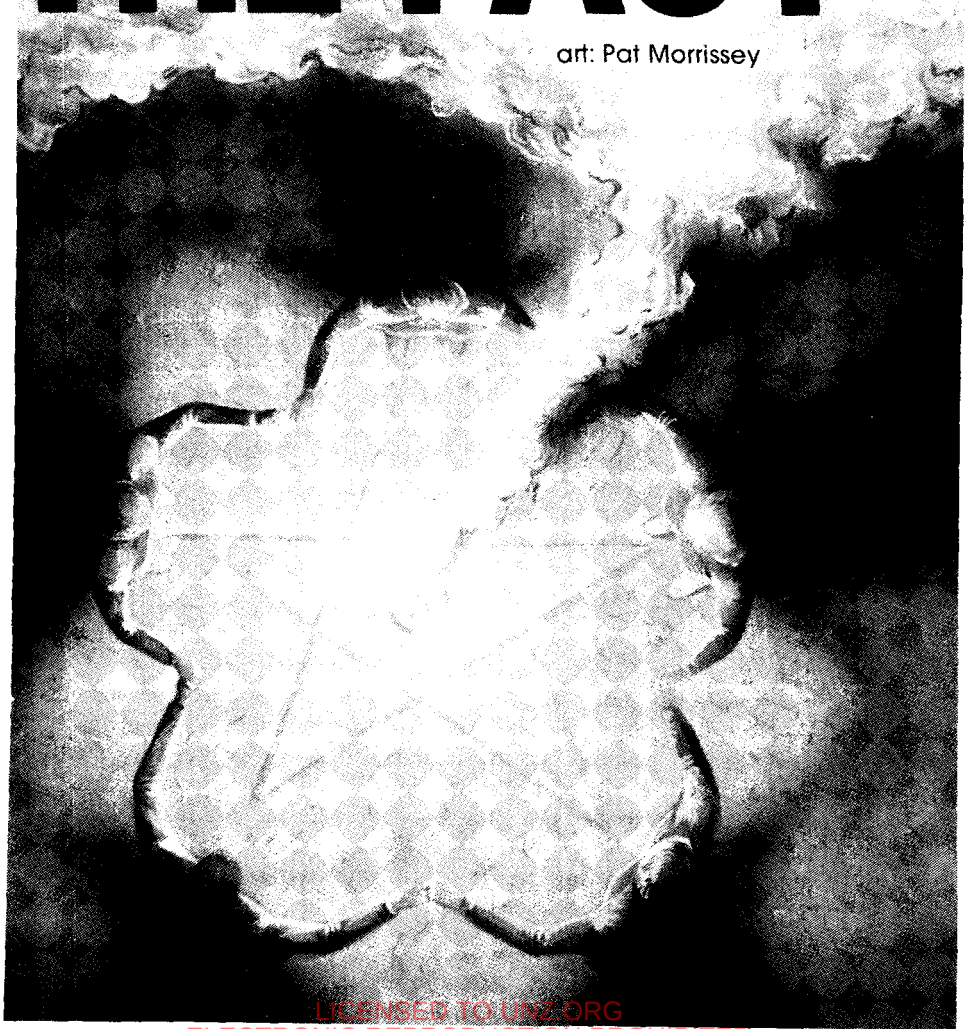
Don Webb

In Don Webb's latest tale for *Asimov's*, five people find that their lives are inextricably entwined as a result of their participation in . . .

THE PACT

art: Pat Morrissey



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Paul Wilacowski was a typical campus warlock. Chances are, you've met one: wears an ankh, is less than dedicated to personal hygiene, has all the Crowley and Castenada books, has big candles in his dorm room, and has some of the best drug connections on campus. He also had followers—folks that dropped by to have their Tarot read, or smoke dope, or rap about the true nature of the cosmos. On the day of the pact, there were four followers present—Sharon Sacromet, Burt Johns, Aaron Ross, and Margaret Basmajion. Two red candles and one black candle burned atop one of the dorm-issued desks. Wind-driven rain splattered the windows. Paul's roommate was absent. Paul had driven him out about midsemester—proof of Paul's "magickal" powers. Sharon, Burt, and Margaret sat on the lower berth of the bunk bed. Aaron slumped against the desk without candles. Paul had inverted the gray metal trashcan and was straddling it. A faceted crystal bob spun slowly on its string, creating prisms from the candlelight and the overhead fluorescent. It was April 30, the last day before Dead Week.

"I suppose," said Sharon, "that we're going to look back upon these as our Golden Days."

Aaron said, "Of *course* these are our Golden Days. This is as close as we're ever going to *get* to a zen-like existence. We eat when we're hungry. Sleep when we're tired."

"Some of us," said Sharon, "do *go* to class and accept other forms of intolerable order into our lives."

"The Golden Years are whatever period that's far enough away from you," said Burt. "My Golden Years right now are the sixth grade, when I got my ten-speed."

Paul stroked the lower half of his pewter ankh. "He's right, of course. When you become aware of your other lives, they seem to be more golden than this one. Golden beads in the mist of allternity. It's a trick of perspective."

"Hard to say."

Aaron said, "This is all bullshit. We're too young for this kind of schmaltzy nostalgia."

Paul said, "You don't treasure time yet, because you haven't learned to feel the presence of death, our eternal companion."

The spring storm that had been raging outside blew the door open. The *Unicorn in Captivity* poster tore from its masking-tape moorings. Rain splattered the bare brick wall, and everyone was chilled. Paul dismounted the trashcan and locked the door. Paul was favored by external events. It made him a more plausible guru. Sharon loosely rolled up the fallen poster.

"Even *if* I cultivated awareness of death, what would I gain? We still all die in the end anyway," said Aaron.

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"If you cultivated that awareness, you wouldn't *dally* with things," Sharon said. "You'd make up your mind as if every minute was your last. It's the only realistic approach. There's no such thing as immortality."

"Of course there is," said Paul. "Immortality isn't hard to achieve. We could all obtain immortality tonight, if we had a mind to."

"What's the catch?" asked Burt. "We got to write our names in the Black Book?"

"Nothing like that. Not really. We have to sacrifice something. Our togetherness."

"Our togetherness?" asked Sharon.

"Death comes to *individuals*. If we were to bond together as one individual, death could only take us *as a whole*. As long as we stayed apart—never more than four together at one time—we would be safe."

Burt Johns said, "What about a nuclear war? Death could hit five people, no matter how far apart they were."

Margaret asked, "Would you *want* to be immortal in a post-holocaust world?"

"You got a point."

Paul said, "Well, what do you think? It's Walpurgisnacht, a window for such things. You only have a short time to decide."

Aaron said, "I suppose *you're* going to do all this—wave your arm and we all come together like a starfish."

"I can only direct. No union is possible without the full cooperation of the five."

Aaron said, "And that's it? You do this thing and we live forever? In what kind of condition?"

Paul said, "Would Tithonus have quibbled at such things?"

Margaret asked, "What if one of us doesn't believe in the ceremony?"

Paul said, "Belief isn't important. Agreement is. Everyone has to agree fully."

Aaron said, "I'm going to get a Coke and one of those oatmeal things." He started toward the door, but Burt stood up and placed himself between Aaron and the door.

Burt said, "You're staying here."

"I was just going to get a Coke."

"It won't work," said Paul, "unless everyone agrees fully. You can't keep him here."

"I was just going to get a Coke. Jesus, you talk like this stuff is *real*."

Sharon said, "It *is* real. Or it at least *might* be real. As real as religion."

"We go through a lot of postures for other things as though they were real," added Margaret.

"Well, if we're going to do this, let's get on with it, 'cause if I don't get a Coke soon I'll get the shakes."

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"I don't think that's quite the right attitude," said Sharon.

"*He* said attitude didn't matter," said Aaron, nodding at Paul. "So make with the mystic passes." Burt moved away from the door, but he held himself warily—ready to catch anyone who tried to flee. Paul looked at each of his guests, then swept the room with his eyes, as though checking for things unseen to normal men. He walked to his desk and pulled open the top drawer. From amid copper paper clips, rubber bands, and hole reinforcers, he picked out a piece of magenta chalk and a small, slightly verdigrised brass bowl. He took a stoppered jar from underneath the desk. He took a few pieces of silvery metal out of the kerosene-filled jar—sodium stolen from the chem lab. He put the sodium in the bowl and poured a little kerosene over it. He placed the bowl in the center of the largest clear area of linoleum.

"You know there's a fire code here, don't you?" said Aaron.

Paul picked up the chalk and sketched a large magenta pentagram on the yellow-gray linoleum. The bowl dotted the center.

"This is the secret of the pentagram. Five against death. Sharon, you stand there. Burt, on the point to the right, Margaret, to the left. And Aaron, over here next to me."

When everyone was in position, Paul held the chalk over his head, broke it in two, and tossed the fragments into the trashcan.

Paul said, "Let all who have ears to hear and power to lend draw near and witness this birthing. We are joined by the ancient lines. We are joined by the air we breathe. We are joined by experience. We are joined by love. We are joined by this rite. We have but one mouth, which speaks the words of joining. We have but one heart, which beats in all our chests. We have but one mind, which thinks all thoughts. We have but one soul, which contains all dreams. We have but one death, which we exile to the furthest places of allternity by the power of our fivefold strength. The words of joining: *Tamaghis ba'den yasswaddah waghdaas naufana.* The word of unity: *Ghadis.* I am one. I can die only in the whole of my body. I am stronger than five, stronger than six. I am stronger than the magics of men. I am stronger than the anthrophagus gods. My points can now spread over the earth, knowing the mystery of unity and the secret of the pentagram." Then Paul spat into the bowl, and the silver sodium burst into a clear red fire. He made a circular gesture with his right hand, ending with his index finger touching the center of the ankh, where the loop met the two bars.

Paul began erasing the magenta chalk line with his tennis shoe even before the sodium flame was completely spent. The ceremony was evidently over.

"That's it?" asked Aaron. "Two, maybe three minutes for eternal life?"

"Dying can take less than a second," said Paul.

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"Well, I'm going to go get a Coke. Anybody else want anything?"

"When you leave," said Paul, "do not return. We five can never gather again under the same roof. May you travel well at the speed of destiny."

"Yeah. Good luck with finals to *you,* too."

Aaron Ross had had a bad moment during the ceremony. Something had *glistened* in the air when Paul made his final gesture. He's tricked us, Aaron thought, he's gathered something from each of us and put it into that ankh of his. This was a ceremony to give *him* eternal life. I'll get it back. I'll get it back sometime. He saw Paul once during Dead Week, and once again during finals. This hadn't been a good semester for Aaron. He'd begun under Sco Pro. He had taken five classes and failed all of them, even the proverbial jelly roll of Introduction to Philosophy.

Aaron phoned home for money. He needed seven hundred dollars for summer school. He'd make up for lost time. He converted most of the seven hundred dollars into speed. He'd write those papers. He had three weeks. Dead Week, finals, and grace week. His Korean roommate watched with amazement as he typed, typed, typed. He was halfway through a paper on Thomas Pynchon and information theory when it occurred to him—I could just kill myself! Suddenly everything seemed brighter. He hadn't slept for four days. He burst into a chorus of "Singing in the Rain" and shuffled off to the all-night pharmacy two blocks from campus. He bought a package of Contac and a bottle of Sominex. He took all of them. This could scarcely kill a normal man, much less a drug-hardened space cadet like Aaron. He lay in bed all day and moaned. His roommate called his folks. And his folks drove four hundred miles to pick him up. There was no question of college now.

He went to work in a meat-processing plant. His father had got him the job. It would ruggedize him—make him into a man. Aaron never contacted his high school buddies. He was too ashamed. And his mother and father had removed every address, every phone number, from his college impedimenta. He was a zombie for the first few months, and when he came back to his now-muscular body, he discovered, to his surprise, that he enjoyed physical work. His body thickened. His mind cleared. He got his commercial license, drove a bobtailed truck in the city, took classes at night in the vocational college. In three years, he was a master mechanic, and his boss put him in the shop. This wasn't what his father had intended. He just wanted to toughen the kid, not make him into a goddamned *factory* hand. His father died, and the next year Aaron earned more than his father ever had. Moved out of the house. Bad marriage. Quick divorce. Back into the house. His mother died. All those flowers. Who *are* these people? The boy will never make it on his own. The boy

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was thirty-three. He took the insurance settlement and a mortgage on the house, and opened Aaron's House of Tires.

Aaron's House of Tires didn't do well the first two years. Everyone thought he was a Jew. It was that kind of town. So he borrowed some more and gave to the right charities and bought himself into the right clubs. And he got one important account, and then another, and then several. And he relaxed a little, and took a course at the community college. He became a middling landscape painter. And he met Ellen. And he married her. And he got another store.

He was going over the books in the new place when he saw the man in the trench coat. It was corny and cinematic, but he saw a guy in a trench coat standing behind a bare tree in the falling snow. And the guy was *watching* him. Aaron thought, this is it, I'm finally going to be robbed. He called the police, and when the black-and-white showed up, the guy ran off.

It was a testament to Aaron's place in the community that the police listened seriously to his story.

For the next few months, he saw them everywhere. A woman in a shopping mall, a guy parked outside of the post office, a "priest" at the airport. All of them were featureless, gray individuals who could melt into a crowd like ice on a summer day.

He'd cut a few questionable deals along the way. He'd bought a few warm tires. The zoning board thought of him with dollar signs in their eyes. If they were coming in for a bust, he'd keep his nose clean. If it don't work, it don't work.

He got a seat on the Chamber of Commerce, a beautiful red-haired daughter, a deaconship in a generic Protestant church. He upped his life insurance from fifty thousand to two hundred thousand to half a million dollars. As soon as his insurance agent left his four-bedroom split level, he decided to tell Ellen about the men-in-trench-coats. Ellen listened. Ellen drew on her psychology minor of years before. Ellen told him about paranoia. Aaron remembered Pynchon and his speed-freak days, and agreed to go to therapy.

Aaron worked through his suicide attempt, conquered his feelings of inadequacy, and had an affair with Suzi, his therapist. His daughter got to play the princess in an elementary school play.

Suzi left for Orlando, and Aaron's marriage experienced a renaissance. Kissing in restaurants. Holding hands in public. He began to *experiment* with his painting. He threw the bad ones away. He had a one-man show that was well reviewed in the local papers. He became president of the Chamber of Commerce. His daughter went to junior high. His wife was pregnant—then miscarried. Next summer, they all went to Europe. Aaron cried when he saw graffiti on the megaliths of Stonehenge.

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He got another store, and a fourth in the state capital. He toured his suppliers' factories. "Aaron, we'd like you to meet the creator of self-repairing rubber, our premier biochemist, Paul Wilacowski." Shook hands with the gray-haired man in a lab coat. Where had the gray hair come from? What was happening to time? "Aaron, if you come in now on this bacteria-produced super rubber, you could make a bundle."

Driving home, he remembered. Some things don't even come out in therapy. He had to pull off the road—rock himself as waves of memory descended. Another car had pulled off the road behind him. He looked in his mirror. The gray ones, even here.

Did Paul still wear the ankh under his lab coat?

He pulled back onto the highway. He invested in the new rubber process. It made a bundle, which was good, because the new rubber almost made the tire business obsolete. Who needed a new tire when they could dump the *old* one in a nutrient vat and watch it grow whole in less than a week?

His daughter was accepted at his alma mater. He drove her to campus, hoping that she would make something of herself. Painting in earnest now. Two more shows. One of those shows merited two sentences in a national art journal.

Ellen succumbed to an early twenty-first century technovirus. Some of the developing nations weren't too careful with their biolabs. For solace, Aaron turned to man's oldest bacteria-produced substance. Alcohol removed his grief, as well as most of his other perceptions for five years. His daughter graduated with honors and went over the hills and far away.

A young art student from Belize began her thesis on Aaron Ross. Inevitably, she came to his house. She got the doctors to grow Aaron a new liver. Aaron began to paint again. He married Risa.

His daughter didn't come to the wedding, but she did send an illustrated *Kama Sutra*.

He heard a young painter described as a neo-Rossian.

Goodyear sponsored his paintings at the Jeffers Museum. Risa left the wine-and-cheese reception early. When Aaron got back to his hotel, he found a note: "Aaron, if you value the elements of your life, come to Room 312 Lovett-Castenada Building at your old school tonight."

It was unsigned, but the handwriting was familiar. There was a commotion in the hotel. Someone had shot a gray nondescript man in the lobby. The crowd parted for Aaron. Except for the drying red blood, there was no color at all to the corpse.

Aaron took a robocab to his old school. The Lovett-Castenada was one of the newer buildings, a huge breathing column of living rock. Two security guards showed him into 312.

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He was the last to arrive. Paul, Burt, Sharon, and Margaret were already there. They looked so *old*. It had only been fifty years.

Margaret loved Burt. Burt loved *Sharon*.

This state of affairs had plagued Margaret for two years. In a few days, Burt (and Sharon) would graduate, and it was very likely she'd never see either of them again. When Paul proposed the ritual, she saw her chance. She would *will* union between herself and Burt. She didn't agree to this fivefold business at all. She strained and pushed while Paul incanted. As the magical words were uttered, she felt some of her self extending toward Burt, but she didn't know if she'd made contact.

Burt left with Sharon. Margaret went down to the game room and played pinball with some pimple-faced freshman. After thirty minutes, she gave way to temptation and went back to Paul's room. Maybe Paul could use his powers to make Burt love her. She was ready to offer Paul anything. His door was locked. His light was off, even though it was only midnight by the campus clock.

Architecture major and French minor, so she was busy during Dead Week. She saw Burt on the second day of finals. "Could we go over to the pub for a drink?" They split a squat bottle of Portuguese rosé. She told him everything. And they went to her off-campus apartment. And there was sex, with Margaret doing most of the work. And it was over. And Burt said, "It's not often you get to fulfill someone else's fantasies." He left. And Margaret didn't see him again for eight years, although, one summer, she did receive an invitation to Burt and Sharon's wedding.

In her senior year, Margaret threw herself into her studies. She freelanced translations for *Architectural Digest*. She graduated *summa cum laude*. She got a job in a local gallery. Look pretty and answer the phone. She did calligraphy for her new friends. Xmas cards, birthdays, special announcements. A few of the gallery customers bought cards from her. It never went further than that.

She moved in with a soft-spoken female artist. At first, they shared utilities, then interests, and, finally, their bodies. This evolved into a reasonable three-year simulation of domestic bliss. Lamb patties with mustard. Tiffany lamps. Then she was fired for shamelessly promoting her lover's work. And her lover said, "Don't you think my stuff's good enough to sell without you pimping for it?" Margaret pointed her dented old Mustang toward Las Vegas.

A big hit on a one-armed bandit bought a month's room and board. She got a job as a waitress. Silk teddies, fat men pinching her bottom. She parlayed the waitress job into maitre d'. She got a brindle cat and a bigger apartment. Calligraphy again, and much love from her crew. Time resolved itself into floor shows and sizzling platters.

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Burt and Sharon walked in with their deteriorating marriage. Margaret sat down at their table to laugh about old times, but mainly to hear Burt insult Sharon. When they left, Margaret thought, "Thank God I escaped *that* trap." Two years later, Burt came in alone and they went out to dinner. And a month later, she was on a plane to New York to get married.

"There're some things you don't ask me about, love, and my business is one of them."

She took up tennis and golf and looking good. Unlike Bluebeard's wife, she never looked in any forbidden closets. Bliss became numbness, and the brindle cat died of old age. They had a son by a surrogate mother. Senators came to their dinner parties.

They shipped their son off to a military academy as soon as they could.

She won the club's tennis competition three years running. Christmas dinners got bigger and bigger and she lost her son behind the turkey. She thought about taking a lover—Burt had so many young women from the city, after all, chosen from an elite corps of corporate volunteers. Lifted and tucked, pounded and sucked, her body was remade.

A medical technology firm developed a synthetic organism. They started with an amoeba and cultured into it a facsimile of a T-cell. It lured AIDS viruses to their doom. It also ended some forms of leukemia and leprosy. Margaret had no idea that they owned a controlling interest in the firm. She loved the new house in Tasmania.

She drifted into a different trajectory from Burt. They saw each other for the first time in months the day their son went off to West Point. She decided to try her hand at a novel. Autobiographical. She filled twenty legal pads with her beautiful handwriting. When her focus passed through her college years, she rediscovered the pact. She flew to New York to confirm some details with Burt.

Burt was civil. Burt was cool. Burt reminded her that there were things she should never ask. She wasn't surprised when Burt mentioned divorce. After all, she'd never known the man.

The settlement was generous. The divorce was not contested. Margaret decided to devote her life to becoming reacquainted with the details of her autobiography. Go back to her sources.

She tracked down her lesbian lover, only to discover that her lover had come close to fame and then hanged herself. She found that the gallery owner had become a minor factotum in an art-book house. And she found out that Aaron Ross was emerging as a painter. She sent an agent to buy some of his paintings. She kept two and donated the rest to a Tasmanian museum. She bought some more and gave them to her friends. She set her netscan for *Ross, Aaron* and watched his reputation slowly grow.

She sought after her old waitress crew next. She moved among them

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unseen, dispensing scholarships to their children, getting better jobs for them or their husbands, quashing their rivals. She wrote all this good-fairy stuff into her autobiography—a chapter of what was, a chapter of what she made things. The fair copy now filled four hundred legal pads. She must have it typed up some day.

The yearly spa treatments did less and less good. She was among the 40 percent of the population that didn't respond to rejuvenation treatments. She took it very bravely until one of her friends' grandchildren said, "Who's that old lady?" She ended her invisible philanthropy and retired to her Tasmanian estate. She wrote and wrote, each page possessing a calligraphy more beautiful than the last. Until, finally, the last pages were so ornate as to be unreadable by anyone save Margaret.

Sharon Sacromet wrote her a letter inviting her to the class reunion. Margaret smiled, gladdened that Sharon was achieving senility at a faster rate than she was. Margaret didn't belong to *her* class—Sharon, Burt, and Paul were all a year ahead. She called up Worldata and discovered that Sharon suffered from an unidentified wasting disease. She looked so bad on the screen, Margaret E-mailed a confirmation to the invitation.

The campus had changed. Living buildings instructed students of all ages directly. Some dolphins served as guest lecturers in the oceanography department. She hadn't kept up with the changes as well as she had thought. She'd thought that oceanography was still dominated by modified men—*homo aquans*. At the hotel, there had been a message to meet Sharon at one of the new buildings.

Sharon knitted, Paul fidgeted. Margaret tried to find something to say; it really had been decades since she'd spoken to anyone face to face. She began to venture a remark on the weather, when two guards carried Burt in.

He was unconscious.

When Burt left Margaret's room with that sunshine-in-the-stomach feeling, he encountered Aaron's parents. They were putting Aaron's clothes in black plastic trash bags and carrying them to Aaron's cream-colored Dodge Dart. Burt went up to Aaron's room. Aaron sat cross-legged on the dirty tile floor.

"What's up?"

"I tried to kill myself."

Hard to respond to that one. Everybody knew Aaron was fucking up this semester—pot and philosophy—but *this*.

"Why?"

"Because I'm such a shit. I tried to solve a lot of problems at once. Simultaneous equations."

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Aaron's dad grabbed Burt by the collarbone and wheeled him around. Aaron mumbled some kind of protest—it sounded like, "No, he's not one of them." Aaron's dad said, "You get out of here. You leave my boy alone."

Burt left the building, putting the ugly parking-garage-looking dorm between him and the loading car. He plopped himself down on a concrete bench. Too many feelings all at once. *Aaron tried to kill himself, but it hadn't worked.* Shock became a slow smile.

Finals went well, and the transition to Yale law school went better. Sharon went to work at a chic New Haven department store. Mom and Dad were a little unhappy at this unattached young lady making the apartment payments, but the times were changing. His fascination with the law and the beautiful courtyards of Yale was sincere. By the end of his first term, those-who-know had recognized him as one of the Bright Young Men.

Burt learned to cook, to wash up, to do the laundry. Burt's affections for the increasingly ethereal Sharon lessened as he sublimated more and more of his energy into the Law. He read great chunks of the Law, trying to pull the whole of that system into himself.

Yale graduations are always spectacular. Divinity students wore battery-powered Christmas light haloes. Bright-eyed scientists carried meter-long cardboard slide rules. The law students donned the powdered wigs of the English judiciary, and New Haven herself relented and provided beautiful weather. Flash bulbs everywhere. Mom and Dad were *so* proud. Burt married Sharon the next day, and the interviews began after that.

Burt's first office was eight-by-ten. His second office was ten-by-twelve and overlooked Wall Street. His third office was a corner, and had two windows. He moved out of the city and split firewood on the weekends. He sneered at the lawyers from other firms. *I shall live for thousands of years. What* I *build shall be permanent.*

The firm flew him to Cleveland to facilitate a major merger. He met Paul in a steak house. He never spoke of the Secret, but he bought Paul's dinner. Paul told him about his research. When Burt got back to New York, he shifted all his savings into the stock of the new Cleveland chemical firm.

There was a big fight. Sharon viewed the money as belonging to both of them. Burt tried to explain why he put the money into a long-term growth fund without mentioning Paul or the Secret. If you mentioned the magic, it went away. Burt began staying nights at the Yale Club. He began buying occult books. If *Paul* could do things like this, then surely *he*. . . . He met this hot redhead at the counter of the Magickal

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Childe. There was a discreet affair, which became an indiscreet affair, which became making love in elevators.

A Senior Partner dropped by.

"Son, if you want to make Junior Partner, you've got to stop these goings-on. You need to patch up your marriage. Look respectable."

Sharon enjoyed losing money well enough, so he took her to Las Vegas. She saw how the other half lived and came back respectable. Respectable and passionless. They read the faxsheets respectably. Walked through the garden respectably. Respectably gave respectable parties for respectable people. Two months later, he achieved the respectable position of Junior Partner. Then, in another month, respectable divorce proceedings began. Of course, if Junior Partners want to be even *considered* for Senior Partnership, they must have a wife. So he returned to Las Vegas and picked up Margaret. Changed his luck.

The investment in WatliCo began to pay off.

He flew to Houston to wheel-and-deal. But no dice, the other lawyer looked just like Aaron Ross. He'd forgotten about Aaron. Aaron hadn't believed. He might show up at any time where the other four were. Where *was* Aaron? The Aaron-lookalike walked all over him, because all he could think of was the pact. After agreeing to who knew how bad a deal, Burt sat on the hotel room bed, reading every accident report in the *Post*. The next day, he flew to Jamaica. He ignored all of the what-the-hell's-going-on? telegrams from the Senior Partners. He needed a strategy.

Aaron. Aaron was the loose cannon. The law no longer drove him. He set his sights on power. If you're going to be deathless, you can acquire lots of power. The law might serve as a means, but it would be a passing fad—something for his first few decades. But he had to watch Aaron. That guy in Houston had been a sign. Aaron might give the whole thing away. And then the masses of angry peasants would storm the castle with torches and pitchforks, demanding a cut. A piece of the immortality. He flew back to New York and called Pinkertons.

The Senior Partners forgave him. His one mistake had shown that he was human after all. Someone they could trust, but not fear. So when old Graham's heart burst, they gave Burt a Senior Partnership. And if he no longer threw himself into every case, and if he sought cases with a particular political or psychological flavor, it was all right—he'd proved himself worthy of being a Good Old Boy.

Burt had a son, because it was a good thing for a Senior Partner to have a son. He'd assumed that Margaret would want to raise it, but she had other hobbies. So he hired the process out. Margaret had done her job reasonably well, so he bought her a big hunk of Tasmania. He began

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crowning and dismissing CEOs. His name appeared in the *Wall Street Journal,* but only occasionally, because he had become a Secret Chief.

He had Tokyo and London waiting on the phone when Margaret came in. She'd come down with something. Art? Oh, writing. She started to talk about the Secret. Didn't she know what she was doing? He had to get rid of her. Security took her out of the building and a divorce took her out of his life. All these young women suddenly appeared from the firms he controlled to offer him condolences on his bad marriage. It wasn't like before when he'd kept one or two on the side. *These* women thought they might be wife number three, and Burt did all he could to encourage that idea. There were parties and extravagances and a marble bathtub filled with champagne. Imported champagne. And wealthy men and women sought invitations to Burt's parties, and if they were filmed doing something they shouldn't—well, that was surely a coincidence.

Burt balanced his private vice with public virtue. He wanted the planet to be around a good long time. Almost every ecological society in the world had Burt's name on its list of patrons. He created a rain forest in the high desert of the Amazon. He had just returned from that dampness, where he had seen the meter-long blossoms which smell of rotten meat, when he received the invitation to his fiftieth class reunion. He would see Paul and Sharon again. He consulted Pinkerton—Aaron *would* be in town. Safely across town at the Fessenden showing his paintings. And, of course, Margaret would be on the other side of the world.

The city was cleaner, slicker than he'd remembered it. Before he went to the reception, he wanted to call his man one more time. He had to have another report on Aaron to feel safe. The phone rang and rang on the other end.

Then two men walked into his hotel room.

Sharon was interested in sainthood. That's why the ceremony was important. It takes a long time to become a saint. That's also why she was interested in Burt. Who else would treat her badly enough? A long hot summer before they moved north to Yale. Her tennis shoes mildewed. She chased roaches the size of mice. Burt read.

They got to New Haven. She walked and rode the bus, walked and rode the bus, and finally got a job among the mannequins, beating out other spouses of law students. High heels hurt her feet, and this was the road to sainthood. Endless fluorescent light made her dizzy, and this was the road to sainthood. She'd come home, damp clothes hung from the improvised line across the flat. Damp clothes brushed her face as she found her way to Burt.

Passion had dimmed before she married Burt. Likewise the desire for sainthood. Inertia alone sent her to the courthouse. A good firm, a good

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New York firm, hired Burt, and she quit her job. They bought into a good co-op. She could devote herself to museums and libraries—mainly she watched cable TV. She listened to Regis Philbin and Dr. Ruth. She stuck a subway token in Burt's hand as he left for work, removed his impeccable coat when he returned. Slowly she met the other corporate wives in the co-op. From one-to-one to one-to-many to many-to-many, they became a group. They decorated for Christmas and Hanukkah, Halloween and the Fourth of July. Eventually they found politics, the great balm for boredom. She marched against international tyranny, protested the persecution of various dissidents, and espoused a mildly feminist rhetoric.

They moved to the country and her activism transmuted into correspondence. She was a great writer of checks. Once a quarter, she went to Atlantic City with some of her buddies from the co-op. Burt made more money so that she could lose more. She cut a big check for the ACLU, and it bounced. How embarrassing. She called Burt so that Burt could call the bank. Burt came home at midday and told her that the time for games was over. He'd put all their money into some kind of chemical firm. Probably made nerve gas. Suddenly the slogans became reality, and she realized that it was *capitalism* she was rebelling against. Burt rode back to town and spent the night at the Yale Club.

She spent her allowance on leftist journals. She didn't see much of Burt, and when she did see him, he was reading *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Red hairs everywhere. One day he came home with candy and flowers and let's-go-to-Las-Vegas. By "coincidence," they ran into Margaret. Sharon had known that Burt had been with her years ago, but she hadn't realized that he'd kept tabs on her. *If he wants the bitch, he can have her.* In less than eight weeks, the divorce was in motion.

Sharon joined an arcology-commune in New Mexico. At first, she was a farmhand, but an opening in the medical unit arrived and she began nurse's training. Computer-aided instruction. Once a month, she went by flapper to Santa Fe for personal evaluation and training. She set bones, gave allergy shots, spotted the director's cancer. Her "practice" extended beyond the commune. She learned Spanish. She treated ranchers living on land granted to their ancestors by Spanish kings. Everyone urged her to run for the state house. She couldn't do it. Who would take care of her people? One of the ranch wives gave her an old family recipe for piñon-nut candy.

It became a sign of distinction among American leftists to receive a tin of piñon-nut candy at Christmas time. She flew to Chicago every May for the Haymarket anniversary. People listened when she spoke. So she spoke less and less. She didn't want some silly offhand remark to achieve proverb status. She became director of the arcology.

At about the same time as designer disease-fighting organisms hit

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the market, unknown plagues appeared. Many people, especially the unenfranchised, saw a link between the two. The new plagues were popularly known as technoviruses. New Mexico built a huge hospital at Santa Fe for the study and prevention of technoviruses. They offered the directorship to Sharon, and she accepted. She believed that love was essential to healing. She had her nurses and doctors touch the patients directly, eschewing waldoes and rubber gloves. There were no cures, but patients lasted longer at her hospital. She had to fight to be sure that money didn't buy berths. Everyone has the right to life. When she became infected, she hid it from her staff and the media. The work was too important.

The first two years of her illness were comparatively easy. Then the virus settled in her lungs, and the pain and the wasting began. She had to retire; it was too obvious what was going on. She bought a small adobe house near Taos, and it became a place of pilgrimage. Everyone wanted her answers. *She* wanted death—she prepared for it sunrise and sunset, but death did not come. After weighing such an absurd idea for a long time, she decided that the ritual had closed death's doors for her. Hadn't Paul mentioned Tithonus? Tithonus had loved Dawn and she had granted him eternal life, but *not* eternal youth. Slowly he'd wasted away, until he became a grasshopper. The heavy snows on her roof—she thought of Tithonus. The replastering of mud in the spring—she thought of Tithonus. The hot dust of summer—she thought of Tithonus. The golden aspens of fall—she thought of Tithonus. She began to trade her answers for other information. Where were they now? What were they doing? Heads of state, important doctors, guerrilla leaders—all joined in her conspiracy.

She hung out red chilies to dry, and a courier brought her one of Aaron's paintings. It hung on the wall opposite the Navajo rug. When the fiftieth anniversary neared, she saw her chance. She read her dossier on Margaret, she arranged a show for Aaron. She would have Aaron's wife detained for a few hours. She would buy off or otherwise eliminate his watchdog. Nothing would stop her now. A coughing fit took her and held her till she spat blood on the floor. When it was over, she crawled to her morphine works and gave herself a shot.

"This is the best I could do. It's as close in space to Paul's dorm room as possible. Oh, hello, Aaron, first to leave, last to arrive," said Sharon.

"Does one of you have Risa, or are we all in this together?" asked Aaron.

Sharon said, "Oh, we are surely all in this together, but a couple of friends of mine are entertaining your beautiful black wife until morning. You see, I even had the place decorated for you."

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Aaron's painting, *Lisa's Crown,* a neo-rayonist rendering of his daughter's tinsel crown from her elementary school play, hung on the western wall. The room was otherwise bare, save for five overstuffed green leather chairs. There were no windows. An illumination plant floated lazily near the ceiling. Someone had chalked a shaky red pentagram on the neo-marble floor.

"You're making a mistake," said Burt, "You can wait out your disease. There'll be a cure eventually."

"So, you finally came around. I've waited for five years, coughing my lungs up every morning. I've been crazy with pain or dull with drugs. We've had long enough, full-enough lives."

"*I* haven't had a full-enough life. Look at Aaron, he was just married two years ago. I'm sure *he* isn't ready to die."

Paul said, "Would someone please tell me what the hell's going on?"

Margaret said, "Look, he's senile—and *he's* responsible."

"I am *not* senile," Paul said. "Responsible for *what?* Kidnapping is a serious crime, Sharon. I'm leaving now."

"Even if you could break through the locked door, my guards have orders to shoot."

"So, this is the great humanitarian," Burt sneered.

"Even humanitarians have the right to die," said Sharon.

"Responsible for *what?"* asked Paul.

"Look, if you're going to have us all killed," said Aaron, "you might as well have your assassins come in and mow us down. Otherwise this is a bad joke."

"Five different doctors have told me that they know of no reason why I'm still alive. Things will run their natural course very soon. Before midnight, I bet."

Margaret said, "No more May Days for you?"

"I see that you followed my career."

"We have datascan in Tasmania."

Burt said, "Of *course* she followed your career. We're all intertwined. Our lives run together again and again. It was only my quick thinking that kept this meeting from occurring years ago. You. It's *your* fault." He pointed at Aaron.

"I only came here," said Aaron, "because of a terrorist act."

"I swear nothing untoward will happen to your wife," said Sharon.

Margaret said, "Except making her a widow."

Sharon said, "I'm only causing to happen what should have happened naturally."

Burt said, "*Naturally* I should've never let you have that compost pile."

"You're talking about that ceremony!" said Paul, "I remember now, the chalk on the floor."

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"Well, if this is the end of things," said Margaret, "I want you to know that I still love you. Love you after all the cruelty." She faced Burt. Burt looked away.

"But you don't *understand*," said Paul.

"I understand well enough. I'm tired of being Sibyl. I tried to better my little patch of the world and all these people started asking me all their questions. Do you know what it's like to run a big part of the world? I could've kept my mouth shut, but what if my counsel—poor though it is—is the best thing available? So I kept answering questions. Those men outside, they are there because I answered questions. Now, like the sibyl, I just want to die."

"You don't understand at all!" said Paul. "It was a *joke*."

"A joke?" asked Aaron.

"I had to study for my Biochem 3 finals. I just wanted to get all of you people out of my *room*. I wanted to make sure you wouldn't hang around."

"That isn't possible," said Burt. "We're all still alive."

"Hundreds of thousands of people our age are alive!" Paul shouted. "There's a *reunion* going on outside, for Chrissakes!"

"No. We're going to live for thousands of years. How else can you explain our lives' interconnectedness?" asked Burt.

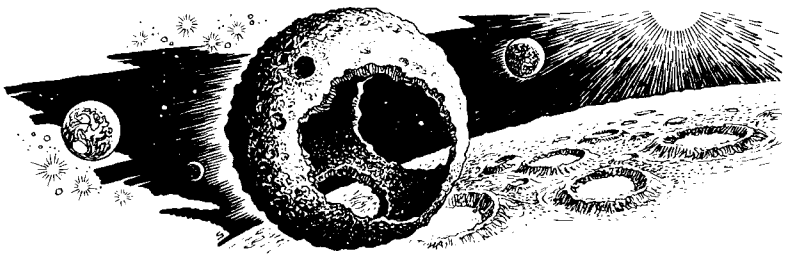
"Nothing exists in a vacuum. We're no more interconnected than any five friends." Paul stared at them in amazement. "You *can't* have lived your whole life on a joke. On *my* joke."

"I pulled strings all across the world to arrange this meeting," said Sharon. "You can't tell me it's a joke. I've hurt too long for it to be a *joke*."

Paul raised his hands, cupping emptiness. Sharon began to cough.

"Paul," Sharon gasped. "It *better not* be a joke."

It would be a long wait until midnight. ●



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REDEMPTION of AUGUST

Tom Purdom

In "The Redemption of August," Tom Purdom reflects on a dramatic turning point in the history of the twentieth century.
Both this story and Mr. Purdom's novel, *Reduction in Arms,* were deeply influenced by the author's life-long interest in military policy, arms control, and military history.

art: Carol Heyer

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How can someone who is not a professional man of letters make an unknown audience understand what it means to live under the Germans? How can he convey the reality of Prussian despotism to people who live in a society that has never been deformed by such a catastrophe—people who live in a *world* that has never been deformed by such a catastrophe? You have never been forced to stare at the sewage the German communications satellites pour into the living rooms of Europe. You have never been questioned by a German GD man who makes you concentrate on every word he utters while he speaks a human language with all the grace of someone who has spent his life grunting and barking. You have never seen a classroom of French children standing at attention while they sing—in their own language!—a "hymn" in praise of the very man—the German Kaiser himself—who is the ultimate symbol of their degradation.

I realize you may not know what a "communications satellite" is. I am assuming no one will read this for at least fifty years. If you happen to have opened the envelope before then, I can only tell you that someday people will transmit images—pictures that move—in the same way they now transmit radio and telephone messages. Every home will have a device that can receive such pictures. In theory, every citizen of the civilized world will be able to enjoy, inexpensively and conveniently, every work of genius ever created for the stage. The plays of Racine, the operas of Lully—they will all, in theory, be at the disposal of the most isolated farmer.

In the milieu in which I endured most of my early life, however, there were few occasions on which the satellites transmitted such treasures. Hour after hour, day after day, the minds of the European people were distracted by cheap entertainments chosen by the fat-rumped oafs who had spread *Kultur* across Europe at the point of a bayonet.

One of my uncles spent six years of his life in prison because he had dared to resist our German "overseers" and the "friendly government" that shined their Prussian boots. I myself was forced to live in exile at the southern tip of Africa. From my twenty-third birthday until I was almost forty—through all the most vigorous years of my young manhood—I was cut off from my language . . . from the art, and music, and food and wine of my own people . . . from all the familiar daily realities that feed the soul of the true patriot.

My name is Alain Varess. I am writing this in the year 1914 but I was born in Lyon in 1971. Only two months ago, I was breathing the poisoned air of the ninth year of the twenty-first century. Anyone who happens to read this during the next few years will be convinced I am a lunatic. Fifty years from now—when gigantic airplanes roar across the skies and

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human beings routinely use electronic entertainment devices—my story will seem more believable. If Mr. "Greenway" is right, my readers may even be living with communications satellites and electronic information systems by then. And only a few years beyond that—before the end of the century—you will see the beginning of the research that brought me—and the man I had come to foil—on a journey though time itself.

I do not fully understand the scientific discoveries that brought me here. I was only an administrator—an accountant—at the observatory that employed me. I can only tell you the principle I used had something to do with the immense gravity fields that surround certain astronomical objects. One of the younger astronomers at the observatory realized that time could be twisted in some fashion and began to experiment with his ideas. He confided in a slightly older colleague who had become something of a confidante, she told me about it, and two years later I found myself standing near a rural road in France, with a coil rising behind me and a portable electronic device controlling the forces generated by the coil.

Even then the functionaries of the Prussian autocracy almost destroyed all my hopes. They didn't know I was about to vanish into the past, of course. They were pursuing me because they had discovered I had entered my native country on a forged passport. Fifteen minutes before I had planned to drive to the spot I had selected for my departure, a GD and a blue-coated collaborator arrived at the house where I was staying. The spray from a chemical self-defense device took care of the collaborator. A kick in the appropriate target left the sausage-bottom writhing on the lawn. By the time I turned out of the driveway, however, a helicopter—a special kind of airplane—was shadowing my truck as I raced down the road. Thirty German troops charged toward me as I stood in front of the coil, my hands clutching the bars of a bicycle, and waited for the forces I had unleashed to take effect.

There is no way anyone can tell you how it feels to be relocated in time. I had planned to arrive in June of 1914, so I could spend a month in Paris during its last summer as a free city, but it was two weeks before I could begin to truly savor the experience. There were whole days when I had to keep reminding myself that the people on the streets were solid beings and I couldn't walk right through them. The first few times I ate anything, I realized I didn't really believe the food could give my body any nourishment.

I had planned to ride to Paris by bicycle. I had even obtained a machine that had been built with the frame angles and proportions that had been standard in the early part of the century. With the bicycle and some bread and cheese, I could reach Paris without any currency. In Paris, I

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would sell the twelve small diamonds I had with me and the money problem would be solved.

It was a good plan, but of course nothing ever works out exactly the way you planned. Only a German staff officer could be foolish enough to believe he could foresee every eventuality. Five miles after I started pedaling, the bicycle developed a puncture. I had done very little bicycling in my own time and I discovered, after an hour of struggle, that I didn't know how to use my repair kit. My custom-made machine ended up hidden behind a bush.

Fortunately, I had also decided to take an expensive harmonica with me, just in case I needed to raise money before I reached Paris. Harmonicas hadn't changed much in ninety-five years—even the brand name was the same—and I sold mine in the next small town and bought a railroad ticket.

My hasty departure had also meant that I had taken a few items that hadn't been included in my original plans. I had been changing clothes when the German troops had arrived and I had been forced to leave my 1914 trousers in my bag and merely slip into my 1914 jacket. My wallet had still been tucked into the pocket of my twenty-first century trousers, so I arrived in my new environment with some plastic cards that twenty-first century people used for banking purposes and an electronic calculating device—a kind of adding machine that was about the size and thickness of a calling card. I had also come through time with my container of disorientation gas clipped to my shirt pocket.

So I lived in Paris, in luxury, in the last innocent June of its history as the capital of a free republic. I ate in restaurants where Germans were regarded as foreigners. I sat in cafés and watched the comings and goings of the first truly free French men and women I had ever seen. I made love to young women who had never primped and wiggled in the hope that they might attract the touch of Teutonic paws. And on the last day of June—as the newspapers were still reporting the first reactions to Franz Ferdinand's assassination—I left for the Belgian border and my rendezvous with the mysterious "Greenway."

Three days later, I saw the man who had brought me on this bizarre adventure riding away from the center of town on his bicycle. I was returning to our mutual hotel after a visit to the railroad station and I knew it was him because I had identified him the night before at dinner. He was the only *anglais* in the town, he was the correct age, and he claimed he was taking photographs for a book he was writing on the French countryside, just as the Greenway I knew about had claimed.

It was now July 3. In a few days, according to my information, he would leave the hotel and take up residence on the Dinar farm. In less

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than thirty days, mobilization would be declared in France and Germany, and General von Kluck's hordes would begin their advance through the neutral soil of Belgium. The masterpiece of Prussian military morality—the "Schlieffen Plan" that they speak of with such pride—would begin with German troops crossing a border the apostles of *Kultur* had sworn to respect. The huge masses under von Kluck's command would push back the weaker French and British forces in front of them—forces that were smaller than they might have been because no one in Paris or London had believed the animals on the other side of the Rhine would actually betray their oath and violate Belgian neutrality. Von Kluck's hordes would swing across France in a great arc that would take them behind Paris, and the French army would be surrounded less than six weeks after the commencement of hostilities.

That had been the German vision, and von Kluck had followed the plan to the letter and turned it into the reality that had disfigured my entire life. Every horror that had blighted my existence—every second of the ninety-five years of shame and tyranny that had followed the surrender of the French army in September of 1914—had been the direct result of von Kluck's relentless execution of the maneuver the German General Staff had been planning for almost two decades.

There had been a moment, however, when Von Kluck had considered a modification in Schlieffen's scheme. Von Kluck has even admitted it in his memoirs. His men were tired. He believed the French army had exhausted itself with its unsuccessful attacks against the center of the German front. He did not know there were several reserve divisions still posted in Paris.

Von Kluck had been fully prepared to shorten the arc and swing *in front* of Paris—where he could have been hit in the flank by the reserves the commander of the Paris sector still had under his command. He had avoided this blunder (as you can see if you read his memoirs with care) only because he had received an urgent radio message—uncoded—in which the German high command had warned him of the reserves and unequivocally ordered him to proceed with the original plan.

But who had sent that message? The message on which the entire success of Schlieffen's plan had, in the end, depended? In the late 1940s, a small group of American academics had devoted large portions of their careers to that question. The leaders of the "Germanic Pan-European Hegemony" had never officially admitted it, but the testimony of several German staff officers had indicated that no one in German headquarters had ever transmitted such a message.

In 1996, while I was browsing through a pile of second hand books in Johannesburg, I came across a volume that had been written by a writer named Raymonde François Martinel who lived in the American city of

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Philadelphia and called himself L'Exile. It was entitled *The Conspiracies of August* and in its pages Martinel built a massive theory around the findings of a much more famous writer, Madeline Lescaut, who had investigated certain puzzling events that had taken place on a farm near the Belgian border. An Englishman named Greenway had rented a room there in the month of July 1914. When the German advance began, he told the Dinars' daughter he was a British agent. He had a radio with him and he claimed he was supposed to transmit information on German troop movements. The daughter and her brother hid him when the Germans searched the farm for weapons. At one point, the brother tried to leave the house with a shotgun, so he could join some friends who were hoping to fire a few honest volleys at the German columns. "Greenway" became afraid the boy would attract attention to the farm. He threatened the boy with a knife and retrieved the gun in a confrontation in which he stabbed the young man in the thigh. The wound became infected. The boy lost his leg a few weeks later. Years after, when he heard about the controversy over the radio message, he wrote Madame Lescaut. By the time she got around to visiting his village, he had died of alcoholism and she had to piece the story together by interviewing his acquaintances.

To Raymonde the Exile, the story proved that Mr. Greenway was the primary reason he was scraping out a living in a foreign city. Greenway had been a German spy, Raymonde asserted. He had somehow learned, from agents in Paris, of the forces still poised there. He had taken it upon himself to issue an order in the name of his superiors.

It was an entertaining, well written book. I enjoyed the evening I devoted to it. There were many reasons, however, why the behavior of the "spy" made little sense to me. Could any German ever treat his chain of command so cavalierly? And then, years later, I discovered it might be possible to travel in time. . . .

I have often been criticized for my "impetuosity," and it has, in fact, sometimes gotten me into trouble. Still, I had almost been arrested because I had decided to delay my departure by fifteen minutes and carefully reinspect my preparations. Now, seeing Greenway ride away on his bicycle, I grabbed a machine that had been left in front of the hotel. I had already managed to glance through his door and determine that he had a large trunk in his room. My trip to the train station had eliminated the possibility he had checked a package with the attendant.

For half an hour after we left the town, I followed him along the paved white road that passed by neat French farmhouses and well kept fields—a French countryside that had not been disfigured by hordes of automobiles, blocks of "country homes," and the other blessings of German "technical and economic progress." Eventually he turned onto a dirt

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side road and I stopped him in an isolated spot where we were alone with the wind that blew across the wheat fields on both sides of the road.

His eyes widened when I pointed my revolver at him. His hands shot up in the air with such alacrity I almost started laughing. I thought he would hand over his keys as soon as I demanded them but instead he started arguing with me. There was nothing in his trunk of any value, he insisted.

You must remember that my assault on the GD man and his French valet had been the first serious act of violence I had ever participated in. I had assumed Greenway would follow my instructions as soon as he saw the front of my revolver. It had never occurred to me he would stand there arguing with me.

I could have simply killed him, of course. I had already decided I was willing to go to the guillotine. For now, though, I merely wanted access to his radio.

I thought about knocking him out with the revolver and realized I didn't know where to hit him or how hard. Instead, I tried to silence his babbling by telling him the one thing that would convince him I was willing to pull the trigger.

"Give me the keys, monsieur. I don't want to kill you if I can avoid it but don't try to convince yourself I won't. It's the surest way I can make certain General von Kluck never receives your famous message. I've given up my whole life to keep you from making that transmission. If I have to go to the guillotine to stop you, I will."

He shut up as soon as he understood. Then his whole face lit up with excitement—the same excitement I have seen, now and then, on the faces of scientific researchers who have hit ôn some new idea that catches their fancy. The babbling started again and I realized, as I listened to that flow of anglified French, that he had again forgotten about the gun. All he could think of was the fact that I was a time traveler, too. That, and the fact that my presence indicated he had "succeeded."

My voice erupted from me in a bellow that was, I suspect, also a cry of pain. "GIVE ME YOUR KEYS. And give me the knife on your ankle, too. I know about that also."

This time he got himself under control. He handed me the knife. He gave me the keys. He took off his tie and let me bind his wrists to the frame of his bicycle. But all the while he went on talking, endlessly talking, trying to convince me he and I should "exchange information about our alternative histories," trying to persuade me I should support his lunatic assault on the destiny of civilization.

I slashed both his tires with his own knife and left him still mouthing words at me as I rode away. There was a moment, as I turned onto the paved road, when I actually threw back my head and laughed in triumph.

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Had anyone in the whole history of the French people ever done anything that could be compared to this? Everything the so-called "Englishman" had said had made it clear that all my hypotheses had been correct. He had, indeed, come here to transmit the mysterious radio message that had forced General von Kluck to ignore the considerations that were telling him he should modify the Schlieffen Plan. And he had made the journey—every sentence he had uttered had proved it!—because he came from a society in which von Kluck had followed his natural instincts, the Schlieffen Plan had failed, and France had eventually struggled through to victory! I had lived my entire life in a world in which the source of every calamity had been a conspirator who had arrogantly altered the natural course of history.

The maid was working in Greenway's room when I got back to the hotel. I had to hide in my own room until she finished. I knew I had found the radio when I dug through the things in Greenway's trunk and found a metal box in the bottom right hand corner. When I tried to pull the box out of the trunk, however, I discovered it had been welded to the bottom. I searched desperately for the lock and cursed when I realized the meaning of the four brass disks on the left side of the box. The disks appeared to be buttons, but they were actually an electronic device. Greenway had secured the box with an electronic combination lock disguised as a mechanical contrivance.

Once again I managed to control my infamous impetuosity. I checked the corridor before I left the room. I walked calmly and carefully through the hotel café and maintained my pace and demeanor as I proceeded from the hotel to a store only a hundred meters away. I purchased a sturdy long-handled ax and had it neatly wrapped before I carried it back to his room and locked the door behind me.

This time it was I who found myself facing a gun. There had been another knife, it seemed—a folding knife which wasn't mentioned in Madame Lescaut's account. He had cut himself free and managed to beg a ride on a passing truck.

I was confident he wouldn't shoot me. He was obviously not interested in any action that might attract serious notice. I put down the ax when he told me to and once again had to listen while he ranted at me.

I had been assuming he was a German agent who had been transported to the past by German conspirators who were trying to rectify the mistakes of their generals. Now it occurred to me he might actually be a megalomaniac who believed he could singlehandedly legislate the destiny of the entire human race. According to him, the entire twentieth century had been a series of unmitigated disasters—and every nightmare in his catalogue had taken place merely because the German barbarians

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had failed in their attempt to conquer France. In the future he came from, the Schlieffen Plan had, indeed, failed because Von Kluck had modified his original orders. The war, he claimed, had turned into a "stalemate" in which millions of men had died in frontal attacks against fixed positions that stretched across the entire map of Europe. After that there had been a second war which had been even worse than the first. There had been massacres and revolutions, and eventually—as a direct result of the failure of the Schlieffen Plan and the outbreak of the second German attempt to conquer Europe—the development of "superbombs" that could destroy entire cities. He was here, I was to believe, because the entire human race would be wiped out if he didn't make sure Kaiser Wilhelm's hoodlums became the masters of Europe.

Even if he was a German agent, he was giving me many reasons to think he was not a trained professional agent. He talked like many of the scientists and scholars I had known. He was a slight, somewhat bony man with a protruding stomach. He was holding his gun as if it were a harmless piece of pipe.

"What did you do in your own time?" I asked.

He looked startled—as if he couldn't understand why I would ask a personal question—and then told me he was a physicist. At some place near London, he maintained. He had worked with collision accelerators—a concept I was familiar with—and experimented with some elementary particles I had never heard of called "quarks." He had worked out the whole concept of time travel all by himself, he asserted, and embarked on his journey through time entirely on his own, in total secrecy, because he felt it was his duty to save the world from the horrors that would befall it if the Schlieffen Plan failed. He had always been interested in history, he claimed (an odd enthusiasm for a physicist), and he had conceived his whole mad scheme merely because he had always felt von Kluck's decision to modify the Schlieffen Plan had been one of the turning points of twentieth century history.

Some of the things he said about scientific matters sounded like phrases from the conversations I had heard in the cafeteria at the observatory. But did that really make any difference? Couldn't a group of German conspirators have used a real physicist as an agent? They couldn't have known he would have to deal with someone like me, after all.

My face must have flashed him a warning. He stepped back and took a two handed aim at my leg.

"Don't think I won't shoot. I caught you in this room with my trunk open. There's nothing wrong with any of my papers. I'd like to avoid attracting attention if I can. But don't think I won't wound you enough to keep you out of my way for a few weeks."

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I raised my hands and backed out of the room. That night I heard a commotion in the hall and heard him supervising two men who were moving his things out of the hotel.

The first letter was delivered four days later. It was a shock to realize the boy who brought it was Léon Dinar—the young man who would lose his leg in a few weeks. He was obviously a stolid fellow but he was puzzled about the whole business. It wasn't hard to use his curiosity to get him talking. Greenway had arrived earlier than he had originally arranged and had been locked in his room ever since. He had told Monsieur Dinar he wanted to observe the day-to-day workings of the farm. Now he claimed he was working on his book and couldn't be interrupted.

Léon didn't mind the bicycle ride into town because he had a "friend" who lived there. He was still young enough, under all that muscle, that it wasn't hard to guess the sex of the friend. I made sure I gave him the kind of tip that would buy him a lengthy dalliance at the local sweet shop and told him I would have a reply for him the next evening, if he was willing to make another trip into town.

The letter itself was a recapitulation of Greenway's rantings, organized with more care and fleshed out with more detail. Once again I had to hear about the masses of young men who were mowed down by the machine guns as they came out of the trenches, the great city-destroying bombs and the threat they created for civilization. . . .

It was a narrative that was so detailed and even logical that I would have been a fool if I hadn't realized it had to have some relation to a factual record. There was one detail, in fact, which was so monstrous it was hard to believe anyone—least of all a German agent—could have invented it. During the second war, he asserted, the Prussian automatons had given their allegiance to a tyrant who had followed the perverted instincts of the German soul to their logical conclusion and used the technological advances of modern society to systematically gas and burn millions of people.

I pondered that section of his letter for almost an hour after I first read it. Could any German agent have said that about his own people?

But how could I possibly believe his claim that the allied generals had wasted the manpower of their countries in the massive frontal attacks he dwelled on with such relish? I could believe the German generals could have done that. The English might have behaved that way, too. But the generals of my own nation? With their tradition of military dash and brilliance? My own father had followed the progress of the Japanese armies as they had advanced across China behind armored cars and dive bombing airplanes later in the century. Was I supposed to believe

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European generals couldn't think of that, too? During a war that was supposed to have lasted several years?

It didn't matter. Even if every word he wrote was true, how could it matter? One fact remained. Even if he happened to be telling the literal, unadorned truth—and I did not believe he was—wouldn't all the French soldiers who died in the battles described in his letter have wanted a world in which civilization and justice eventually triumphed? Wasn't it better to die fighting than to live through the century of shame and barbarism he had brought upon the nation that was the very soul and tutor of Europe?

I sent him the best answers I could—anything that would keep him writing. Léon went back and forth between us every day for a week. Eventually I advised Léon that the man residing in his father's house was a spy who had been planted by the Germans because they believed the assassination of the Austrian Archduke would soon lead to war. I myself, I asserted, was a government agent who was attempting to amass conclusive proof of Greenway's identity.

One night I bicycled back to the farm with Léon and slipped off my bicycle long before Greenway could have seen me coming up the road. I worked my way through the fields behind the house and joined Léon at the back door. Greenway always opened the door to his room when Léon came back from the town with a message, the boy had told me. The two of us could easily take such a small man by surprise and force our way in.

The door to Greenway's room creaked open as I was creeping up the stairs behind Léon's big back. The "Englishman" had apparently seen Léon leave his bike in front of the house and wondered why it had taken him so long to bring his latest message.

This time I was the one who drew his revolver. Greenway hesitated, with one hand on the door, and I pushed my way around Léon and scrambled toward him.

He kicked at me and we grappled like lunatics at the top of the stairs. Once I caught a maddening, tantalizing glimpse of his trunk as I swayed in front of his door.

A blinding pain shot up my leg. My grip on his wrists loosened and he kicked me again and slipped free. The door slammed. I heard the bolt slide into place.

I turned around, still bent over with anguish, and saw Léon looking up at me with a smile on his over-sized face. The oaf had actually thought the whole thing was amusing! I bellowed at him, and then realized his sister was standing at the bottom of the stairs. Her parents crowded in behind her and I straightened up, in spite of the pain, and tried to concoct

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an explanation that would satisfy minds that had not been dulled by three generations of Teutonic occupation.

Naturally, Greenway now tried to convince Léon's sister he was a British agent, just as he had in Madame Lescaut's account. He even showed Estelle the radio and some credentials he had managed to counterfeit. Léon continued to bring me letters, but he was obviously confused.

But Greenway knew, as well as I did, that I could end all his dreams merely by saying a few words to the right German officers when the gray-coated hordes eventually tramped past the Dinars' house. Estelle might be able to hide him and his radio from the standard German search for shotguns and sporting rifles—but could she hide him from searchers who had been informed that they should look for a British agent and a hidden wireless? The thought of cooperating with the Prussian sadists might make me cringe, but it was, ironically, the simplest way to assure their ultimate defeat.

So now his letters began to dwell on a new suggestion. Why shouldn't he and I join forces and try to approach the leaders of the world? We already had his radio, he argued, as proof we came from a more advanced era. Between us, we could put together "predictions" of the next few weeks that would provide even more proof. He had become a wealthy man in England, he maintained, by taking advantage of the British passion for betting on sporting events. His contacts might not get him to the prime minister, but they could easily lead to a meeting with the "adventurous, imaginative politician" who was currently First Lord of the Admiralty.

I probably would have rejected the idea out of hand if he hadn't suggested we contact Winston Churchill. The only other name he could suggest was the novelist H.G. Wells—a man who had spent the next thirty years hailing the German conquerors for their "unification of Europe"! The First Lord of the Admiralty, on the other hand, had been one of my heroes since I had been a child. He alone, of all British politicians, had recognized that no British government could accept a conquest which had been based on the violation of Belgian neutrality. He alone, for the rest of his life, had steadfastly stood by the French people.

I could even imagine Churchill might believe our story. His love of bold ideas was legendary. And I had, of course, a piece of evidence that would throw the most determined skeptic into turmoil. A politician with a limited knowledge of technical matters might not understand why Greenway's radio was significantly different from a contemporary wireless. My calculator would seem like a miracle to anyone who watched it multiply two numbers.

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And wouldn't it be better, assuming Churchill listened to us, if we could save France from defeat and help her avoid the trials of a protracted war, too?

I had now read over a dozen of Greenway's lengthy letters and I was no longer so certain he was the tool of a monstrous conspiracy some Teutonic fanatics had hatched in a future society in which von Kluck's march had met with the fate it deserved. He had told me many things about himself in his letters and some of them did, indeed, indicate that he might very well be the person he asserted he was—a lonely man who had brooded over the state of the world in the isolation of his study. He was even a bird-watcher—the traditional diversion of the solitary Englishman. According to one of his letters, he had decided to leave his own time—which was apparently sometime in the early 1980s—because one of the world leaders of the era—an American president! if I understood him—was leading his country into a military buildup that would, Greenway had decided, "inevitably end in a war that would destroy civilization." His career as a scientist, he claimed, had been "mediocre." He had always known, he said, that if he ever discovered anything important, it would be by sheer accident. He had kept his discoveries to himself—and made the journey on his own initiative—because he had believed this was his opportunity to finally do something significant for the world.

It was a picture that fitted my own observations of scientists. Many men in those occupations turn to politics when they realize they will never be the Pasteurs or the Curies they dreamed of being. Many of them find it easy to convince themselves that their superior knowledge of science must be accompanied by a superior understanding of political questions.

I paced the floor of my room. Greenway's letters became more and more agitated. On the 27th of July—six days before the first German boots would tramp into Belgium—I agreed to meet him the next evening.

I was supposed to get off my bicycle a hundred yards from the house and let him see me. Then—when he was sure I couldn't slip into the house while he was out of his room—he would come down and we would meet on the road and discuss our next move.

Instead, he was waiting for me behind a hedge when I got off the bike at the appointed place. Again, I found myself looking at his revolver.

I had realized he might do something like this and I had deliberately left my jacket at the hotel and bicycled in my vest. I raised my hands as soon as he revealed himself and twisted from side to side so he could see I couldn't possibly have a gun.

"I'm unarmed," I said. "I want you to understand that. I'm no threat."

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His voice sounded choked and raspy—as if he hadn't talked to anyone in several days. "I just want the calculator, Alain. Just give me that and then you can go."

I shrugged. "It's what I came to do."

"It's the only way I can be sure it will get to the right people. I can't stay here while you're running around loose and I can't assume you've had a change of heart. I still want you to join me later—after I've made the initial contacts."

I shrugged again. "The calculator is in my vest pocket. What do you want me to do with it?"

"Lay it on the ground. Then step back three steps. And don't think I won't shoot. Once I've got that thing in my hands, it won't matter if I cripple you for life."

I took the calculator out of my vest and counted off three steps after I laid it down. He frowned at me, not completely convinced I was harmless, and stepped forward with his eyes fixed on my face.

There was a moment when his gaze wavered. He was bending over the calculator and he had apparently yielded to the impulse to press the buttons and satisfy himself it really worked.

I had been afraid he would realize one of the "pens" in my vest pocket was twice as thick as it should be, but apparently they still didn't have disorientation gases in the society he had come from. He looked up as I stepped toward him but he still wasn't prepared to shoot. The tight stream of liquid leaped out of the generator and formed a cloud in front of his face. I slipped to one side—just in case he fired—and he sat down and stared at me with the same stupid look I had seen on the face of the GD man.

Estelle was working in the kitchen but this time I could forget legalities. She slumped to the floor in her turn and I grabbed the small hatchet her family kept near the rear door.

Greenway had fortified his bedroom door with a spring-loaded lock after my last visit but by now I was berserk. The hatchet smashed against wood and metal. More blows knocked the lock off his chest. I raised the hatchet above my head and the blade fell on the metal box and its Satanic contents.

I had considered the possibility he might buy a replacement for his radio and then realized it was a pointless concern. He needed a portable, easily concealed, battery-powered instrument that could send a strong message across fifty kilometers. Nothing like that existed in the milieu we were living in. Every blow of my ax destroyed components that would not be replaceable for at least fifty years.

He was already standing in the yard when I raced outside, but what did it matter? I had his gun in my belt. I had the calculator. His radio

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was in ruins. I pointed the gas device at him and he raised his hands in front of his face and stepped back.

I almost laughed when I looked back and saw him following me on his own bicycle. He was almost fifteen years older than I, after all. Then I realized he was gaining on me. I had already ridden out to the farm. I had put all my strength into the work I had done with the ax. I had been in a state of agitation from the moment he pulled his pistol on me.

I took the revolver out of my belt and managed to dump the bullets onto the road as I pedaled. Then I waved the gun itself at him and hurled it into a wheat field. This was not the time to shoot someone. There was only one more thing I could do for France—and I intended to do it.

I had hoped he might stop and try to retrieve the gun but he kept coming. His face was so inflamed he looked like he had been lying on a beach. I bent over the handlebars as if I was sprinting through the last mile of the Tour de France and managed to put some extra meters between us. Then my breath ran out and he closed the distance I had gained and cut my lead by another meter.

It was, in retrospect, a mixture of the grandiose and the comic that only a Gallic mind could truly appreciate. It was one of the decisive moments in European history. The fate of every man and woman born in the twentieth century hung on the outcome—and the entire scene consisted of two breathless middle-aged men frantically pedaling bicycles along a rural road!

I could have handed him the calculator, of course. I could even understand why he might have decided he couldn't trust me. But suppose I did give it to him—and then discovered he really was, after all, a German time traveler who had been sent here to reverse the natural course of history? Even if he really was the solitary megalomaniac he claimed to be—suppose he took his story to the leaders of Europe and only the Germans believed him? Hadn't he already proved, by the very scheme that had brought him here, that he was a brooding fanatic who would help the Prussian hordes crush Europe beneath their boots if he believed that was the only way he could achieve his aims?

Two or three farm trucks lumbered past us. A salesman's automobile puttered by in the opposite direction. I veered around a horse-drawn wagon loaded with produce and a moment later my frenzied pursuer rolled past the horse's head.

I realized he was going to catch up with me anyway and decided to slow down in the hope the presence of the wagon driver might help him get his rage under control. He reached out to grab my shoulder as he pulled abreast and I veered toward the edge of the road as I pulled the gas device out of my pocket.

The bicycle slid out from under me. I fell toward Greenway and we

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collapsed in a tangle of limbs and machinery. Tubing pressed painfully against my back. He managed to roll onto me and I covered my face and neck with my arms when I saw his fists falling toward me.

His fists pounded on my chest as if he was trying to stun me by stopping my heart. The horse neighed somewhere above me. I felt a little stabbing pain in my rib cage—as if a sharp corner had been pushed into my skin—and almost smiled when I understood the irony of the situation.

I have no idea where Greenway is now. He may, at this very moment, be sitting in some room—in England? in Germany?—staring helplessly at the useless, bent object he himself mangled in his rage.

Today is August 6—Liège Day, the Day of Ultimate Horror, the day when the Kaiser's arrogant henchmen committed the crime that every honorable spirit will remember from now until the end of time. Only a few hours ago, when the city of Liège ignored a German ultimatum and refused to surrender, a German zeppelin flew over the city and killed nine defenseless civilians by dropping bombs from the air. Every year of my life, from the time I was a few years old, I commemorated August 6 with all the ceremonies I was permitted to attend. As a boy in France, I was a part of that irrepressible minority who attended secret memorial services and wore mourning clothes to school. In the years of my exile, I always participated in the silent march through the streets of Johannesburg that my fellow expatriates organized as an annual reminder of the nightmares that lurk in the German soul. This time, I shall honor the Martyred Nine by reporting for induction in the army of the French Republic. It took most of my last cash to arrange a proper set of identification papers, but I'm certain no one will look too closely at the results.

All around me brave young men are singing as they march toward the frontier, their faces alive with the belief they are fighting the greatest evil the world has ever known. With them, it is only belief—the intuition of minds that have not been clouded by the Teutonic fog that lay across the nation I was raised in. This time, there shall be someone marching in their ranks who fights from knowledge—someone who has actually seen the horrors of the world they and their descendants will live in, if they let themselves be defeated.

August will never again be remembered as a month in which evil won its greatest victory. August 6 will never again be a day that mankind must remember with shame and anguish. ●

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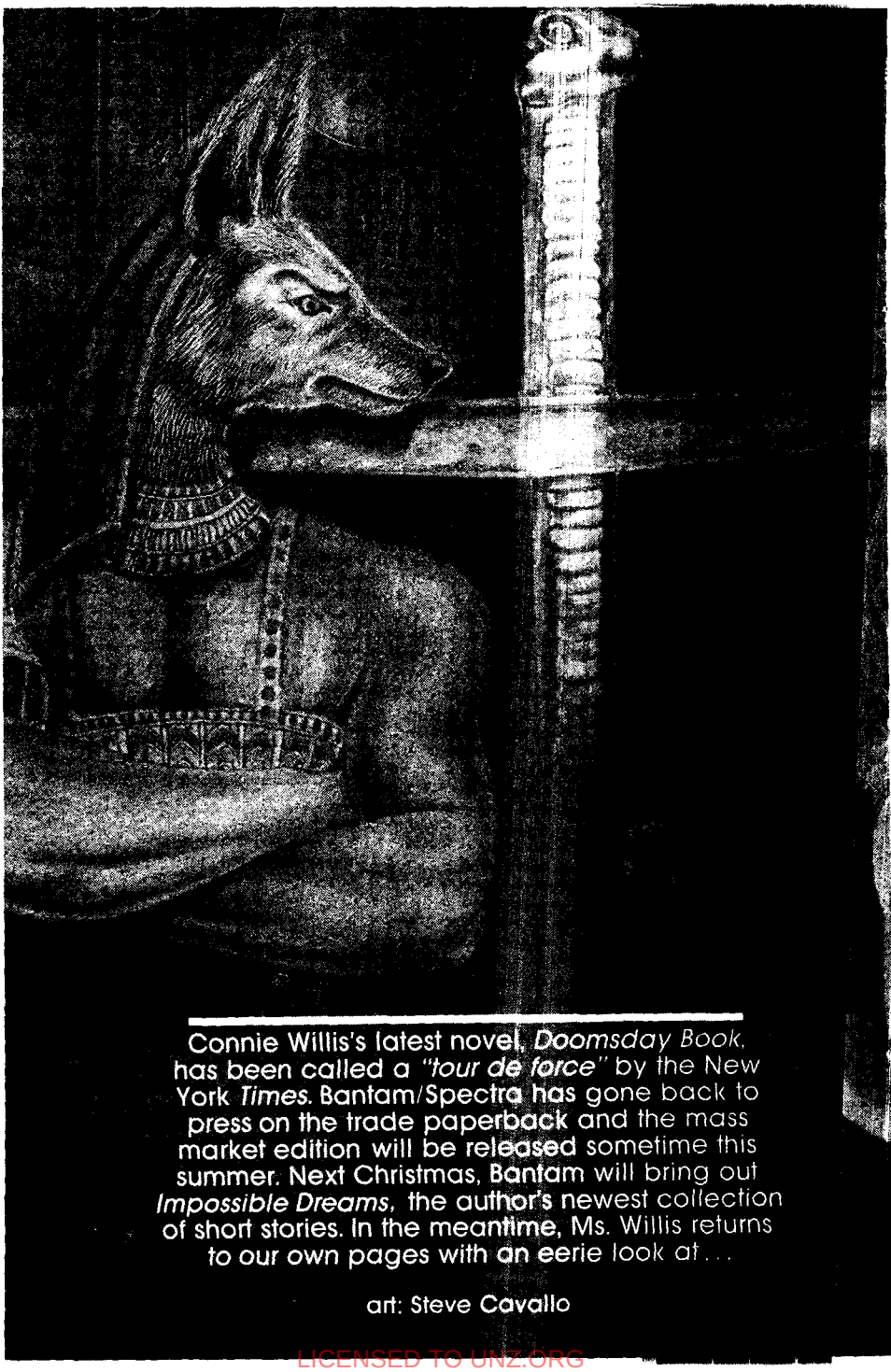

Connie Willis's latest novel, *Doomsday Book*, has been called a *"tour de force"* by the New York *Times*. Bantam/Spectra has gone back to press on the trade paperback and the mass market edition will be released sometime this summer. Next Christmas, Bantam will bring out *Impossible Dreams*, the author's newest collection of short stories. In the meantime, Ms. Willis returns to our own pages with an eerie look at . . .

art: Steve Cavallo

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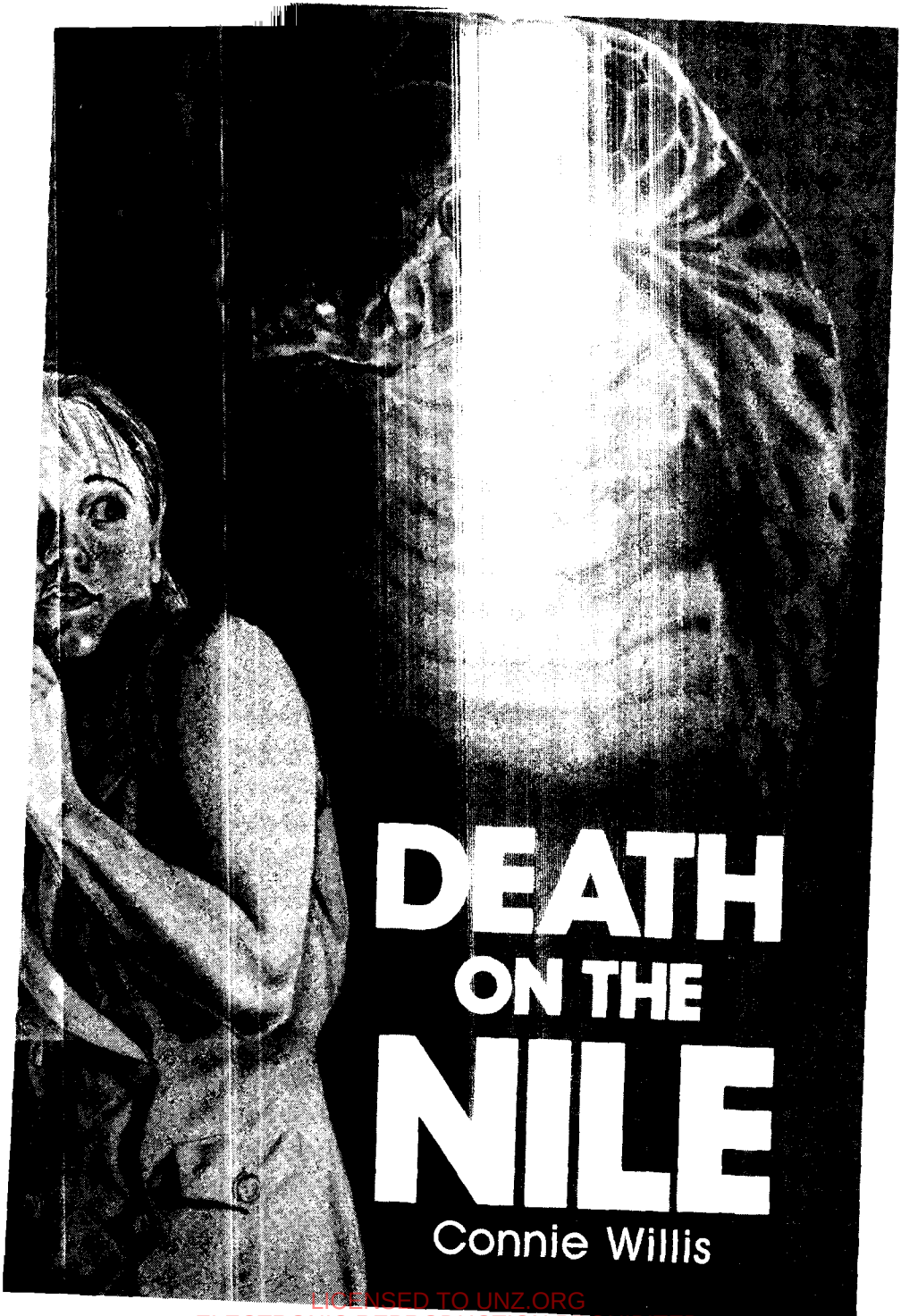

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" 'To the ancient Egyptians,' " Zoe reads, " 'Death was a separate country to the west—' " The plane lurches. " '—the west to which the deceased person journeyed.' "

We are on the plane to Egypt. The flight is so rough the flight attendants have strapped themselves into the nearest empty seats, looking scared, and the rest of us have subsided into a nervous window-watching silence. Except Zoe, across the aisle, who is reading aloud from a travel guide.

This one is Somebody or Other's *Egypt Made Easy*. In the seat pocket in front of her are Fodor's *Cairo* and Cooke's *Touring Guide to Egypt's Antiquities*, and there are half a dozen others in her luggage. Not to mention Frommer's *Greece on $35 a Day* and the Savvy Traveler's *Guide to Austria* and the three or four hundred other guidebooks she's already read out loud to us on this trip. I toy briefly with the idea that it's their combined weight that's causing the plane to yaw and careen and will shortly send us plummeting to our deaths.

" 'Food, furniture, and weapons were placed in the tomb,' " Zoe reads, " 'as provi—' " The plane pitches sideways. " '—sions for the journey.' "

The plane lurches again, so violently Zoe nearly drops the book, but she doesn't miss a beat. " 'When King Tutankhamun's tomb was opened,' " she reads, " 'it contained trunks full of clothing, jars of wine, a golden boat, and a pair of sandals for walking in the sands of the afterworld.' "

My husband Neil leans over me to look out the window, but there is nothing to see. The sky is clear and cloudless, and below us there aren't even any waves on the water.

" 'In the afterworld the deceased was judged by Anubis, a god with the head of a jackal,' " Zoe reads, " 'and his soul was weighed on a pair of golden scales.' "

I am the only one listening to her. Lissa, on the aisle, is whispering to Neil, her hand almost touching his on the armrest. Across the aisle, next to Zoe and *Egypt Made Easy*, Zoe's husband is asleep and Lissa's husband is staring out the other window and trying to keep his drink from spilling.

"Are you doing all right?" Neil asks Lissa solicitously.

"It'll be exciting going with two other couples," Neil said when he came up with the idea of our all going to Europe together. "Lissa and her husband are lots of fun, and Zoe knows everything. It'll be like having our own tour guide."

It is. Zoe herds us from country to country, reciting historical facts and exchange rates. In the Louvre, a French tourist asked her where the Mona Lisa was. She was thrilled. "He thought we were a tour group!" she said. "Imagine that!"

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Imagine that.

" 'Before being judged, the deceased recited his confession,' " Zoe reads, " 'a list of sins he had not committed, such as, I have not snared the birds of the gods, I have not told lies, I have not committed adultery.' "

Neil pats Lissa's hand and leans over to me. "Can you trade places with Lissa?" Neil whispers to me.

I already have, I think. "We're not supposed to," I say, pointing at the lights above the seats. "The seat belt sign is on."

He looks at her anxiously. "She's feeling nauseated."

So am I, I want to say, but I am afraid that's what this trip is all about, to get me to say something. "Okay," I say, and unbuckle my seat belt and change places with her. While she is crawling over Neil, the plane pitches again, and she half-falls into his arms. He steadies her. Their eyes lock.

" 'I have not taken another's belongings,' " Zoe reads. " 'I have not murdered another.' "

I can't take any more of this. I reach for my bag, which is still under the window seat, and pull out my paperback of Agatha Christie's *Death On the Nile*. I bought it in Athens.

"About like death anywhere," Zoe's husband said when I got back to our hotel in Athens with it.

"What?" I said.

"Your book," he said, pointing at the paperback and smiling as if he'd made a joke. "The title. I'd imagine death on the Nile is the same as death anywhere."

"Which is what?" I asked.

"The Egyptians believed death was very similar to life," Zoe cut in. She had bought *Egypt Made Easy* at the same bookstore. "To the ancient Egyptians the afterworld was a place much like the world they inhabited. It was presided over by Anubis, who judged the deceased and determined their fates. Our concepts of heaven and hell and of the Day of Judgment are nothing more than modern refinements of Egyptian ideas," she said, and began reading out loud from *Egypt Made Easy*, which pretty much put an end to our conversation, and I still don't know what Zoe's husband thought death would be like, on the Nile or elsewhere.

I open *Death on the Nile* and try to read, thinking maybe Hercule Poirot knows, but the flight is too bumpy. I feel almost immediately queasy, and after half a page and three more lurches I put it in the seat pocket, close my eyes and toy with the idea of murdering another. It's a perfect Agatha Christie setting. She always has a few people in a country house or on an island. In *Death on the Nile* they were on a Nile steamer, but the plane is even better. The only other people on it are the flight attendants and a Japanese tour group who apparently do not speak

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English or they would be clustered around Zoe, asking directions to the Sphinx.

The turbulence lessens a little, and I open my eyes and reach for my book again. Lissa has it.

She's holding it open, but she isn't reading it. She is watching me, waiting for me to notice, waiting for me to say something. Neil looks nervous.

"You were done with this, weren't you?" she says, smiling. "You weren't reading it."

Everyone has a motive for murder in an Agatha Christie. And Lissa's husband has been drinking steadily since Paris, and Zoe's husband never gets to finish a sentence. The police might think he had snapped suddenly. Or that it was Zoe he had tried to kill and shot Lissa by mistake. And there is no Hercule Poirot on board to tell them who really committed the murder, to solve the mystery and explain all the strange happenings.

The plane pitches suddenly, so hard Zoe drops her guidebook, and we plunge a good five thousand feet before it recovers. The guidebook has slid forward several rows, and Zoe tries to reach for it with her foot, fails, and looks up at the seat belt sign as if she expects it to go off so she can get out of her seat to retrieve it.

Not after that drop, I think, but the seat belt sign pings almost immediately and goes off.

Lissa's husband instantly calls for the flight attendant and demands another drink, but they have already gone scurrying back to the rear of the plane, still looking pale and scared, as if they expected the turbulence to start up again before they make it. Zoe's husband wakes up at the noise and then goes back to sleep. Zoe retrieves *Egypt Made Easy* from the floor, reads a few more riveting facts from it, then puts it face down on the seat and goes back to the rear of the plane.

I lean across Neil and look out the window, wondering what's happened, but I can't see anything. We are flying through a flat whiteness.

Lissa is rubbing her head. "I cracked my head on the window," she says to Neil. "Is it bleeding?"

He leans over her solicitously to see.

I unsnap my seat belt and start to the back of the plane, but both bathrooms are occupied, and Zoe is perched on the arm of an aisle seat, enlightening the Japanese tour group. "The currency is in Egyptian pounds," she says. "There are one hundred piasters in a pound." I sit back down.

Neil is gently massaging Lissa's temple. "Is that better?" he asks.

I reach across the aisle for Zoe's guidebook. "Must-See Attractions," the chapter is headed, and the first one on the list is the Pyramids.

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"Giza, Pyramids of. West bank of Nile, 9 mi. (15 km.) SW of Cairo. Accessible by taxi, bus, rental car. Admission L.E.3. Comments: You can't skip the Pyramids, but be prepared to be disappointed. They don't look at all like you expect, the traffic's terrible, and the view's completely ruined by the hordes of tourists, refreshment stands, and souvenir vendors. Open daily."

I wonder how Zoe stands this stuff. I turn the page to Attraction Number Two. It's King Tut's tomb, and whoever wrote the guidebook wasn't thrilled with it either. "Tutankhamun, Tomb of. Valley of the Kings, Luxor, 400 mi. (668 km.) south of Cairo. Three unimpressive rooms. Inferior wall paintings."

There is a map, showing a long, straight corridor (labeled Corridor) and the three unimpressive rooms opening one onto the other in a row—Anteroom, Burial Chamber, Hall of Judgment.

I close the book and put it back on Zoe's seat. Zoe's husband is still asleep. Lissa's is peering back over his seat. "Where'd the flight attendants go?" he asks. "I want another drink."

"Are you sure it's not bleeding? I can feel a bump," Lissa says to Neil, rubbing her head. "Do you think I have a concussion?"

"No," Neil says, turning her face toward his. "Your pupils aren't dilated." He gazes deeply into her eyes.

"Stewardess!" Lissa's husband shouts. "What do you have to do to get a drink around here?"

Zoe comes back, elated. "They thought I was a professional guide," she says, sitting down and fastening her seatbelt. "They asked if they could join our tour." She opens the guidebook. " 'The afterworld was full of monsters and demigods in the form of crocodiles and baboons and snakes. These monsters could destroy the deceased before he reached the Hall of Judgment.' "

Neil touches my hand. "Do you have any aspirin?" he asks. "Lissa's head hurts."

I fish in my bag for it, and Neil gets up and goes back to get her a glass of water.

"Neil's so thoughtful," Lissa says, watching me, her eyes bright.

" 'To protect against these monsters and demigods, the deceased was given *The Book of the Dead,*' " Zoe reads. " 'More properly translated as *The Book of What is in the Afterworld, The Book of the Dead* was a collection of directions for the journey and magic spells to protect the deceased.' "

I think about how I am going to get through the rest of the trip without magic spells to protect me. Six days in Egypt and then three in Israel, and there is still the trip home on a plane like this and nothing to do for fifteen hours but watch Lissa and Neil and listen to Zoe.

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I consider cheerier possibilities. "What if we're not going to Cairo?" I say. "What if we're dead?"

Zoe looks up from her guidebook, irritated.

"There've been a lot of terrorist bombings lately, and this is the Middle East," I go on. "What if that last air pocket was really a bomb? What if it blew us apart, and right now we're drifting down over the Aegean Sea in little pieces?"

"Mediterranean," Zoe says. "We've already flown over Crete."

"How do you know that?" I ask. "Look out the window." I point out Lissa's window at the white flatness beyond. "You can't see the water. We could be anywhere. Or nowhere."

Neil comes back with the water. He hands it and my aspirin to Lissa.

"They check the planes for bombs, don't they?" Lissa asks him. "Don't they use metal detectors and things?"

"I saw this movie once," I say, "where the people were all dead, only they didn't know it. They were on a ship, and they thought they were going to America. There was so much fog they couldn't see the water."

Lissa looks anxiously out the window.

"It looked just like a real ship, but little by little they began to notice little things that weren't quite right. There were hardly any people on board, and no crew at all."

"Stewardess!" Lissa's husband calls, leaning over Zoe into the aisle. "I need another ouzo."

His shouting wakes Zoe's husband up. He blinks at Zoe, confused that she is not reading from her guidebook. "What's going on?" he asks.

"We're all dead," I say. "We were killed by Arab terrorists. We think we're going to Cairo but we're really going to heaven. Or hell."

Lissa, looking out the window, says, "There's so much fog I can't see the wing." She looks frightenedly at Neil. "What if something's happened to the wing?"

"We're just going through a cloud," Neil says. "We're probably beginning our descent into Cairo."

"The sky was perfectly clear," I say, "and then all of a sudden we were in the fog. The people on the ship noticed the fog, too. They noticed there weren't any running lights. And they couldn't find the crew." I smile at Lissa. "Have you noticed how the turbulence stopped all of a sudden? Right after we hit that air pocket. And why—"

A flight attendant comes out of the cockpit and down the aisle to us, carrying a drink. Everyone looks relieved, and Zoe opens her guidebook and begins thumbing through it, looking for fascinating facts.

"Did someone here want an ouzo?" the flight attendant asks.

"Here," Lissa's husband says, reaching for it.

"How long before we get to Cairo?" I say.

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She starts toward the back of the plane without answering. I unbuckle my seat belt and follow her. "When will we get to Cairo?" I ask her.

She turns, smiling, but she is still pale and scared-looking. "Did you want another drink, ma'am? Ouzo? Coffee?"

"Why did the turbulence stop?" I say. "How long till we get to Cairo?"

"You need to take your seat," she says, pointing to the seat belt sign. "We're beginning our descent. We'll be at our destination in another twenty minutes." She bends over the Japanese tour group and tells them to bring their seat backs to an upright position.

"What destination? Our descent to where? We aren't beginning any descent. The seat belt sign is still off," I say, and it bings on.

I go back to my seat. Zoe's husband is already asleep again. Zoe is reading out loud from *Egypt Made Easy*. "The visitor should take precautions before traveling in Egypt. A map is essential, and a flashlight is needed for many of the sites."

Lissa has gotten her bag out from under the seat. She puts my *Death on the Nile* in it and gets out her sunglasses. I look past her and out the window at the white flatness where the wing should be. We should be able to see the lights on the wing even in the fog. That's what they're there for, so you can see the plane in the fog. The people on the ship didn't realize they were dead at first. It was only when they started noticing little things that weren't quite right that they began to wonder.

"A guide is recommended," Zoe reads.

I have meant to frighten Lissa, but I have only managed to frighten myself. We are beginning our descent, that's all, I tell myself, and flying through a cloud. And that must be right.

Because here we are in Cairo.

Chapter Two: Arriving at the Airport

"So this is Cairo?" Zoe's husband says, looking around. The plane has stopped at the end of the runway and deplaned us onto the asphalt by means of a metal stairway.

The terminal is off to the east, a low building with palm trees around it, and the Japanese tour group sets off toward it immediately, shouldering their carry-on bags and camera cases.

We do not have any carry-ons. Since we always have to wait at the baggage claim for Zoe's guidebooks anyway, we check our carry-ons, too. Every time we do it, I am convinced they will go to Tokyo or disappear altogether, but now I'm glad we don't have to lug them all the way to the terminal. It looks like it is miles away, and the Japanese are already slowing.

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Zoe is reading the guidebook. The rest of us stand around her, looking impatient. Lissa has caught the heel of her sandal in one of the metal steps coming down and is leaning against Neil.

"Did you twist it?" Neil asks anxiously.

The flight attendants clatter down the steps with their navy-blue overnight cases. They still look nervous. At the bottom of the stairs they unfold wheeled metal carriers and strap the overnight cases to them and set off for the terminal. After a few steps they stop, and one of them takes off her jacket and drapes it over the wheeled carrier, and they start off again, walking rapidly in their high heels.

It is not as hot as I expected, even though the distant terminal shimmers in the heated air rising from the asphalt. There is no sign of the clouds we flew through, just a thin white haze which disperses the sun's light into an even glare. We are all squinting. Lissa lets go of Neil's arm for a second to get her sunglasses out of her bag.

"What do they drink around here?" Lissa's husband asks, squinting over Zoe's shoulder at the guidebook. "I want a drink."

"The local drink is zibib," Zoe says. "It's like ouzo." She looks up from the guidebook. "I think we should go see the Pyramids."

The professional tour guide strikes again. "Don't you think we'd better take care of first things first?" I say. "Like customs? And picking up our luggage?"

"And finding a drink of . . . what did you call it? Zibab?" Lissa's husband says.

"No," Zoe says. "I think we should do the Pyramids first. It'll take an hour to do the baggage claim and customs, and we can't take our luggage with us to the Pyramids. We'll have to go to the hotel, and by that time everyone will be out there. I think we should go right now." She gestures at the terminal. "We can run out and see them and be back before the Japanese tour group's even through customs."

She turns and starts walking in the opposite direction from the terminal, and the others straggle obediently after her.

I look back at the terminal. The flight attendants have passed the Japanese tour group and are nearly to the palm trees.

"You're going the wrong way," I say to Zoe. "We've got to go to the terminal to get a taxi."

Zoe stops. "A taxi?" she says. "What for? They aren't far. We can walk it in fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes?" I say. "Giza's nine miles west of Cairo. You have to cross the Nile to get there."

"Don't be silly," she says, "they're right there," and points in the direction she was walking, and there, beyond the asphalt in an expanse of sand, so close they do not shimmer at all, are the Pyramids.

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It takes us longer than fifteen minutes. The Pyramids are farther away than they look, and the sand is deep and hard to walk in. We have to stop every few feet so Lissa can empty out her sandals, leaning against Neil.

"We should have taken a taxi," Zoe's husband says, but there are no roads, and no sign of the refreshment stands and souvenir vendors the guidebook complained about, only the unbroken expanse of deep sand and the white, even sky, and in the distance the three yellow pyramids, standing in a row.

" 'The tallest of the three is the Pyramid of Cheops, built in 2690 B.C.,' " Zoe says, reading as she walks. " 'It took thirty years to complete.' "

"You have to take a taxi to get to the Pyramids," I say. "There's a lot of traffic."

"It was built on the west bank of the Nile, which the ancient Egyptians believed was the land of the dead."

There is a flicker of movement ahead, between the pyramids, and I stop and shade my eyes against the glare to look at it, hoping it is a souvenir vendor, but I can't see anything.

We start walking again.

It flickers again, and this time I catch sight of it running, hunched over, its hands nearly touching the ground. It disappears behind the middle pyramid.

"I saw something," I say, catching up to Zoe. "Some kind of animal. It looked like a baboon."

Zoe leafs through the guidebook and then says, "Monkeys. They're found frequently near Giza. They beg for food from the tourists."

"There aren't any tourists," I say.

"I know," Zoe says happily. "I told you we'd avoid the rush."

"You have to go through customs, even in Egypt," I say. "You can't just leave the airport."

" 'The pyramid on the left is Kheophren," Zoe says, "built in 2650 B.C.' "

"In the movie, they wouldn't believe they were dead even when somebody told them," I say. "Giza is *nine* miles from Cairo."

"What are you talking about?" Neil says. Lissa has stopped again and is leaning against him, standing on one foot and shaking her sandal out. "That mystery of Lissa's, *Death on the Nile*?"

"This was a *movie*," I say. "They were on this ship, and they were all dead."

"We saw that movie, didn't we, Zoe?" Zoe's husband says. "Mia Farrow was in it, and Bette Davis. And the detective guy, what was his name—"

"Hercule Poirot," Zoe says. "Played by Peter Ustinov. 'The Pyramids

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are open daily from 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. Evenings there is a *Son et Lumière* show with colored floodlights and a narration in English and Japanese.' "

"There were all sorts of clues," I say, "but they just ignored them."

"I don't like Agatha Christie," Lissa says. "Murder and trying to find out who killed who. I'm never able to figure out what's going on. All those people on the train together."

"You're thinking of *Murder on the Orient Express*," Neil says. "I saw that."

"Is that the one where they got killed off one by one?" Lissa's husband says.

"I saw that one," Zoe's husband says. "They got what they deserved, as far as I'm concerned, going off on their own like that when they knew they should keep together."

"Giza is nine miles west of Cairo," I say. "You have to take a taxi to get there. There is all this traffic."

"Peter Ustinov was in that one, too, wasn't he?" Neil says. "The one with the train?"

"No," Zoe's husband says. "It was the other one. What's his name—"

"Albert Finney," Zoe says.

Chapter Four: Places of Interest

The Pyramids are closed. Fifty yards (45.7 m.) from the base of Cheops there is a chain barring our way. A metal sign hangs from it that says "Closed" in English and Japanese.

"Prepare to be disappointed," I say.

"I thought you said they were open daily," Lissa says, knocking sand out of her sandals.

"It must be a holiday," Zoe says, leafing through her guidebook. "Here it is. 'Egyptian holidays.' " She begins reading. " 'Antiquities sites are closed during Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting in March. On Fridays the sites are closed from eleven to one P.M.' "

It is not March, or Friday, and even if it were, it is after one P.M. The shadow of Cheops stretches well past where we stand. I look up, trying to see the sun where it must be behind the pyramid, and catch a flicker of movement, high up. It is too large to be a monkey.

"Well, what do we do now?" Zoe's husband says.

"We could go see the Sphinx," Zoe muses, looking through the guidebook. "Or we could wait for the *Son et Lumière* show."

"No," I say, thinking of being out here in the dark.

"How do you know that won't be closed, too?" Lissa asks.

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Zoe consults the book. "There are two shows daily, seven-thirty and nine P.M."

"That's what you said about the Pyramids," Lissa says. "*I* think we should go back to the airport and get our luggage. I want to get my other shoes."

"*I* think we should go back to the hotel," Lissa's husband says, "and have a long, cool drink."

"We'll go to Tutankhamun's tomb," Zoe says. " 'It's open every day, including holidays.' " She looks up expectantly.

"King Tut's tomb?" I say. "In the Valley of the Kings?"

"Yes," she says, and starts to read. "It was found intact in 1922 by Howard Carter. It contained—"

All the belongings necessary for the deceased's journey to the afterworld, I think. Sandals and clothes and *Egypt Made Easy*.

"I'd rather have a drink," Lissa's husband says.

"And a nap," Zoe's husband says. "You go on, and we'll meet you at the hotel."

"I don't think you should go off on your own," I say. "I think we should keep together."

"It will be crowded if we wait," Zoe says. "I'm going now. Are you coming, Lissa?"

Lissa looks appealingly up at Neil. "I don't think I'd better walk that far. My ankle's starting to hurt again."

Neil looks helplessly at Zoe. "I guess we'd better pass."

"What about you?" Zoe's husband says to me. "Are you going with Zoe or do you want to come with us?"

"In Athens, you said death was the same everywhere," I say to him, "and I said, 'Which is what?' and then Zoe interrupted us and you never did answer me. What were you going to say?"

"I've forgotten," he says, looking at Zoe as if he hopes she will interrupt us again, but she is intent on the guidebook.

"You said, 'Death is the same everywhere,' " I persist, "and I said, 'Which is what?' What did you think death would be like?"

"I don't know . . . unexpected, I guess. And probably pretty damn unpleasant." He laughs nervously. "If we're going to the hotel, we'd better get started. Who else is coming?"

I toy with the idea of going with them, of sitting safely in the hotel bar with ceiling fans and palms, drinking zibib while we wait. That's what the people on the ship did. And in spite of Lissa, I want to stay with Neil.

I look at the expanse of sand back toward the east. There is no sign of Cairo from here, or of the terminal, and far off there is a flicker of movement, like something running.

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I shake my head. "I want to see King Tut's tomb." I go over to Neil. "I think we should go with Zoe," I say, and put my hand on his arm. "After all, she's our guide."

Neil looks helplessly at Lissa and then back at me. "I don't know. . . ."

"The three of you can go back to the hotel," I say to Lissa, gesturing to include the other men, "and Zoe and Neil and I can meet you there after we've been to the tomb."

Neil moves away from Lissa. "Why can't you and Zoe just go?" he whispers at me.

"I think we should keep together," I say. "It would be so easy to get separated."

"How come you're so stuck on going with Zoe anyway?" Neil says. "I thought you said you hated being led around by the nose all the time."

I want to say, Because she has the book, but Lissa has come over and is watching us, her eyes bright behind her sunglasses. "I've always wanted to see the inside of a tomb," I say.

"King Tut?" Lissa says. "Is that the one with the treasure, the necklaces and the gold coffin and stuff?" She puts her hand on Neil's arm. "I've always wanted to see that."

"Okay," Neil says, relieved. "I guess we'll go with you, Zoe."

Zoe looks expectantly at her husband.

"Not me," he says. "We'll meet you in the bar."

"We'll order drinks for you," Lissa's husband says. He waves goodbye, and they set off as if they know where they are going, even though Zoe hasn't told them the name of the hotel.

" 'The Valley of the Kings is located in the hills west of Luxor,' " Zoe says and starts off across the sand the way she did at the airport. We follow her.

I wait until Lissa gets a shoeful of sand and she and Neil fall behind while she empties it.

"Zoe," I say quietly. "There's something wrong."

"Umm," she says, looking up something in the guidebook's index.

"The Valley of the Kings is four hundred miles south of Cairo," I say. "You can't walk there from the Pyramids."

She finds the page. "Of course not. We have to take a boat."

She points, and I see we have reached a stand of reeds, and beyond it is the Nile.

Nosing out from the rushes is a boat, and I am afraid it will be made of gold, but it is only one of the Nile cruisers. And I am so relieved that the Valley of the Kings is not within walking distance that I do not recognize the boat until we have climbed on board and are standing on the canopied deck next to the wooden paddlewheel. It is the steamer from *Death on the Nile*.

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Lissa is sick on the boat. Neil offers to take her below, and I expect her to say yes, but she shakes her head. "My ankle hurts," she says, and sinks down in one of the deck chairs. Neil kneels by her feet and examines a bruise no bigger than a piaster.

"Is it swollen?" she asks anxiously. There is no sign of swelling, but Neil eases her sandal off and takes her foot tenderly, caressingly, in both hands. Lissa closes her eyes and leans back against the deck chair, sighing.

I toy with the idea that Lissa's husband couldn't take any more of this either, and that he murdered us all and then killed himself.

"Here we are on a ship," I say, "like the dead people in that movie."

"It's not a ship, it's a steamboat," Zoe says. " 'The Nile steamer is the most pleasant way to travel in Egypt and one of the least expensive. Costs range from $180 to $360 per person for a four-day cruise.' "

Or maybe it was Zoe's husband, finally determined to shut Zoe up so he could finish a conversation, and then he had to murder the rest of us one after the other to keep from being caught.

"We're all alone on the ship," I say, "just like they were."

"How far is it to the Valley of the Kings?" Lissa asks.

" 'Three-and-a-half miles (5 km.) west of Luxor,' " Zoe says, reading. " 'Luxor is four hundred miles south of Cairo.' "

"If it's that far, I might as well read my book," Lissa says, pushing her sunglasses up on top of her head. "Neil, hand me my bag."

He fishes *Death on the Nile* out of her bag, and hands it to her, and she flips through it for a moment, like Zoe looking for exchange rates, and then begins to read.

"The wife did it," I say. "She found out her husband was being unfaithful."

Lissa glares at me. "I already knew that," she says carelessly. "I saw the movie," but after another half-page she lays the open book face-down on the empty deck chair next to her.

"I can't read," she says to Neil. "The sun's too bright." She squints up at the sky, which is still hidden by its gauzelike haze.

" 'The Valley of the Kings is the site of the tombs of sixty-four pharoahs,' " Zoe says. " 'Of these, the most famous is Tutankhamun's.' "

I go over to the railing and watch the Pyramids recede, slipping slowly out of sight behind the rushes that line the shore. They look flat, like yellow triangles stuck up in the sand, and I remember how in Paris Zoe's husband wouldn't believe the *Mona Lisa* was the real thing. "It's a fake," he insisted before Zoe interrupted. "The real one's much larger."

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And the guidebook said, Prepare to be disappointed, and the Valley of the Kings is four hundred miles from the Pyramids like it's supposed to be, and Middle Eastern airports are notorious for their lack of security. That's how all those bombs get on planes in the first place, because they don't make people go through customs. I shouldn't watch so many movies.

" 'Among its treasures, Tutankhamun's tomb contained a golden boat, by which the soul would travel to the world of the dead,' " Zoe says.

I lean over the railing and look into the water. It is not muddy, like I thought it would be, but a clear waveless blue, and in its depths the sun is shining brightly.

" 'The boat was carved with passages from the *Book of the Dead*,' " Zoe reads, " 'to protect the deceased from monsters and demigods who might try to destroy him before he reached the Hall of Judgment.' "

There is something in the water. Not a ripple, not even enough of a movement to shudder the image of the sun, but I know there is something there.

" 'Spells were also written on papyruses buried with the body,' " Zoe says.

It is long and dark, like a crocodile. I lean over farther, gripping the rail, trying to see into the transparent water, and catch a glint of scales. It is swimming straight toward the boat.

" 'These spells took the form of commands,' " Zoe reads. " 'Get back, you evil one! Stay away! I adjure you in the name of Anubis and Osiris.' "

The water glitters, hesitating.

" 'Do not come against me,' " Zoe says. " 'My spells protect me. I know the way.' "

The thing in the water turns and swims away. The boat follows it, nosing slowly in toward the shore.

"There it is," Zoe says, pointing past the reeds at a distant row of cliffs. "The Valley of the Kings."

"I suppose this'll be closed, too," Lissa says, letting Neil help her off the boat.

"Tombs are never closed," I say, and look north, across the sand, at the distant Pyramids.

Chapter 6: Accommodations

The Valley of the Kings is not closed. The tombs stretch along a sandstone cliff, black openings in the yellow rock, and there are no chains across the stone steps that lead down to them. At the south end of the valley a Japanese tour group is going into the last one.

"Why aren't the tombs marked?" Lissa asks. "Which one is King

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Tut's?" and Zoe leads us to the north end of the valley, where the cliff dwindles into a low wall. Beyond it, across the sand, I can see the Pyramids, sharp against the sky.

Zoe stops at the very edge of a slanting hole dug into the base of the rocks. There are steps leading down into it. "Tutankhamun's tomb was found when a workman accidentally uncovered the top step," she says.

Lissa looks down into the stairwell. All but the top two steps are in shadow, and it is too dark to see the bottom. "Are there snakes?" she asks.

"No," Zoe, who knows everything, says. "Tutankhamun's tomb is the smallest of the pharaohs' tombs in the Valley." She fumbles in her bag for her flashlight. "The tomb consists of three rooms—an antechamber, the burial chamber containing Tutankhamun's coffin, and the Hall of Judgment."

There is a slither of movement in the darkness below us, like a slow uncoiling, and Lissa steps back from the edge. "Which room is the stuff in?"

"Stuff?" Zoe says uncertainly, still fumbling for her flashlight. She opens her guidebook. "Stuff?" she says again, and flips to the back of it, as if she is going to look "stuff" up in the index.

"*Stuff*," Lissa says, and there is an edge of fear in her voice. "All the furniture and vases and stuff they take with them. You said the Egyptians buried their belongings with them."

"King Tut's treasure," Neil says helpfully.

"Oh, the *treasure*," Zoe says, relieved. "The belongings buried with Tutankhamun for his journey into the afterworld. They're not here. They're in Cairo in the museum."

"In Cairo?" Lissa says. "They're in Cairo? Then what are we doing here?"

"We're dead," I say. "Arab terrorists blew up our plane and killed us all."

"I *came* all the way out here because I wanted to see the treasure," Lissa says.

"The coffin is here," Zoe says placatingly, "and there are wall paintings in the antechamber," but Lissa has already led Neil away from the steps, talking earnestly to him.

"The wall paintings depict the stages in the judgment of the soul, the weighing of the soul, the recital of the deceased's confession," Zoe says.

The deceased's confession. I have not taken that which belongs to another. I have not caused any pain. I have not committed adultery.

Lissa and Neil come back, Lissa leaning heavily on Neil's arm. "I think we'll pass on this tomb thing," Neil says apologetically. "We want to get to the museum before it closes. Lissa had her heart set on seeing the treasure."

" 'The Egyptian Museum is open from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M. daily, 9 to 11:15

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A.M. and 1:30 to 4 P.M. Fridays,' " Zoe says, reading from the guidebook. " 'Admission is three Egyptian pounds.' "

"It's already four o'clock," I say, looking at my watch. "It will be closed before you get there." I look up.

Neil and Lissa have already started back, not toward the boat but across the sand in the direction of the Pyramids. The light behind the Pyramids is beginning to fade, the sky going from white to gray-blue.

"Wait," I say, and run across the sand to catch up with them. "Why don't you wait and we'll all go back together? It won't take us very long to see the tomb. You heard Zoe, there's nothing inside."

They both look at me.

"I think we should stay together," I finish lamely.

Lissa looks up alertly, and I realize she thinks I am talking about divorce, that I have finally said what she has been waiting for.

"I think we should all keep together," I say hastily. "This is Egypt. There are all sorts of dangers, crocodiles and snakes and . . . it won't take us very long to see the tomb. You heard Zoe, there's nothing inside."

"We'd better not," Neil says, looking at me. "Lissa's ankle is starting to swell. I'd better get some ice on it."

I look down at her ankle. Where the bruise was there are two little

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puncture marks, close together, like a snake bite, and around them the ankle is starting to swell.

"I don't think Lissa's up to the Hall of Judgment," he says, still looking at me.

"You could wait at the top of the steps," I say. "You wouldn't have to go in."

Lissa takes hold of his arm, as if anxious to go, but he hesitates. "Those people on the ship," he says to me. "What happened to them?"

"I was just trying to frighten you," I say. "I'm sure there's a logical explanation. It's too bad Hercule Poirot isn't here—he'd be able to explain everything. The Pyramids were probably closed for some Muslim holiday Zoe didn't know about, and that's why we didn't have to go through customs either, because it was a holiday."

"What happened to the people on the ship?" Neil says again.

"They got judged," I say, "but it wasn't nearly as bad as they'd thought. They were all afraid of what was going to happen, even the clergyman, who hadn't committed any sins, but the judge turned out to be somebody he knew. A bishop. He wore a white suit, and he was very kind, and most of them came out fine."

"Most of them," Neil says.

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"Let's *go*," Lissa says, pulling on his arm.

"The people on the ship," Neil says, ignoring her. "Had any of them committed some horrible sin?"

"My ankle hurts," Lissa says. "Come *on*."

"I have to go," Neil says, almost reluctantly. "Why don't you come with us?"

I glance at Lissa, expecting her to be looking daggers at Neil, but she is watching me with bright, lidless eyes.

"Yes. Come with us," she says, and waits for my answer.

I lied to Lissa about the ending of *Death on the Nile*. It was the wife they killed. I toy with the idea that they have committed some horrible sin, that I am lying in my hotel room in Athens, my temple black with blood and powder burns. I would be the only one here then, and Lissa and Neil would be demigods disguised to look like them. Or monsters.

"I'd better not," I say, and back away from them.

"Let's go then," Lissa says to Neil, and they start off across the sand. Lissa is limping badly, and before they have gone very far, Neil stops and takes off his shoes.

The sky behind the Pyramids is purple-blue, and the Pyramids stand out flat and black against it.

"Come on," Zoe calls from the top of the steps. She is holding the flashlight and looking at the guidebook. "I want to see the Weighing of the Soul."

Chapter 7: Off the Beaten Track

Zoe is already halfway down the steps when I get back, shining her flashlight on the door below her. "When the tomb was discovered, the door was plastered over and stamped with the seals bearing the cartouche of Tutankhamun," she says.

"It'll be dark soon," I call down to her. "Maybe we should go back to the hotel with Lissa and Neil." I look back across the desert, but they are already out of sight.

Zoe is gone, too. When I look back down the steps, there is nothing but darkness. "Zoe!" I shout and run down the sand-drifted steps after her. "Wait!"

The door to the tomb is open, and I can see the light from her flashlight bobbing on rock walls and ceiling far down a narrow corridor.

"Zoe!" I shout, and start after her. The floor is uneven, and I trip and put my hand on the wall to steady myself. "Come back! You have the book!"

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The light flashes on a section of carved-out wall, far ahead, and then vanishes, as if she has turned a corner.

"Wait for me!" I shout and stop because I cannot see my hand in front of my face.

There is no answering light, no answering voice, no sound at all. I stand very still, one hand still on the wall, listening for footsteps, for quiet padding, for the sound of slithering, but I can't hear anything, not even my own heart beating.

"Zoe," I call out, "I'm going to wait for you outside," and turn around, holding onto the wall so I don't get disoriented in the dark, and go back the way I came.

The corridor seems longer than it did coming in, and I toy with the idea that it will go on forever in the dark, or that the door will be locked, the opening plastered over and the ancient seals affixed, but there is a line of light under the door, and it opens easily when I push on it.

I am at the top of a stone staircase leading down into a long wide hall. On either side the hall is lined with stone pillars, and between the pillars I can see that the walls are painted with scenes in sienna and yellow and bright blue.

It must be the anteroom because Zoe said its walls were painted with scenes from the soul's journey into death, and there is Anubis weighing the soul, and, beyond it, a baboon devouring something, and, opposite where I am standing on the stairs, a painting of a boat crossing the blue Nile. It is made of gold, and in it four souls squat in a line, their kohl-outlined eyes looking ahead at the shore. Beside them, in the transparent water, Sebek, the crocodile demigod, swims.

I start down the steps. There is a doorway at the far end of the hall, and if this is the anteroom, then the door must lead to the burial chamber.

Zoe said the tomb consists of only three rooms, and I saw the map myself on the plane, the steps and straight corridor and then the unimpressive rooms leading one into another, anteroom and burial chamber and Hall of Judgment, one after another.

So this is the anteroom, even if it is larger than it was on the map, and Zoe has obviously gone ahead to the burial chamber and is standing by Tutankhamun's coffin, reading aloud from the travel guide. When I come in, she will look up and say, " 'The quartzite sarcophagus is carved with passages from *The Book of the Dead*.' "

I have come halfway down the stairs, and from here I can see the painting of the weighing of the soul. Anubis, with his jackal's head, standing on one side of the yellow scales, and the deceased on the other, reading his confession from a papyrus.

I go down two more steps, till I am even with the scales, and sit down.

Surely Zoe won't be long—there's nothing in the burial chamber except

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the coffin—and even if she has gone on ahead to the Hall of Judgment, she'll have to come back this way. There's only one entrance to the tomb. And she can't get turned around because she has a flashlight. And the book. I clasp my hands around my knees and wait.

I think about the people on the ship, waiting for judgment. "It wasn't as bad as they thought," I'd told Neil, but now, sitting here on the steps, I remember that the bishop, smiling kindly in his white suit, gave them sentences appropriate to their sins. One of the women was sentenced to being alone forever.

The deceased in the painting looks frightened, standing by the scale, and I wonder what sentence Anubis will give him, what sins he has committed.

Maybe he has not committed any sins at all, like the clergyman, and is worried over nothing, or maybe he is merely frightened at finding himself in this strange place, alone. Was death what he expected?

"Death is the same everywhere," Zoe's husband said. "Unexpected." And nothing is the way you thought it would be. Look at the Mona Lisa. And Neil. The people on the ship had planned on something else altogether, pearly gates and angels and clouds, all the modern refinements. Prepare to be disappointed.

And what about the Egyptians, packing their clothes and wine and sandals for their trip. Was death, even on the Nile, what they expected? Or was it not the way it had been described in the travel guide at all? Did they keep thinking they were alive, in spite of all the clues?

The deceased clutches his papyrus and I wonder if he has committed some horrible sin. Adultery. Or murder. I wonder how he died.

The people on the ship were killed by a bomb, like we were. I try to remember the moment it went off—Zoe reading out loud and then the sudden shock of light and decompression, the travel guide blown out of Zoe's hands and Lissa falling through the blue air, but I can't. Maybe it didn't happen on the plane. Maybe the terrorists blew us up in the airport in Athens, while we were checking our luggage.

I toy with the idea that it wasn't a bomb at all, that I murdered Lissa, and then killed myself, like in *Death on the Nile*. Maybe I reached into my bag, not for my paperback but for the gun I bought in Athens, and shot Lissa while she was looking out the window. And Neil bent over her, solicitous, concerned, and I raised the gun again, and Zoe's husband tried to wrestle it out of my hand, and the shot went wide and hit the gas tank on the wing.

I am still frightening myself. If I'd murdered Lissa, I would remember it, and even Athens, notorious for its lack of security, wouldn't have let me on board a plane with a gun. And you could hardly commit some horrible crime without remembering it, could you?

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The people on the ship didn't remember dying, even when someone told them, but that was because the ship was so much like a real one, the railings and the water and the deck. And because of the bomb. People never remember being blown up. It's the concussion or something, it knocks the memory out of you. But I would surely have remembered murdering someone. Or being murdered.

I sit on the steps a long time, watching for the splash of Zoe's flashlight in the doorway. Outside it will be dark, time for the *Son et Lumière* show at the pyramids.

It seems darker in here, too. I have to squint to see Anubis and the yellow scales and the deceased, awaiting judgment. The papyrus he is holding is covered with long, bordered columns of hieroglyphics and I hope they are magic spells to protect him and not a list of all the sins he has committed.

I have not murdered another, I think. I have not committed adultery. But there are other sins.

It will be dark soon, and I do not have a flashlight. I stand up. "Zoe!" I call, and go down the stairs and between the pillars. They are carved with animals—cobras and baboons and crocodiles.

"It's getting dark," I call, and my voice echoes hollowly among the pillars. "They'll be wondering what happened to us."

The last pair of pillars is carved with a bird, its sandstone wings outstretched. A bird of the gods. Or a plane.

"Zoe?" I say, and stoop to go through the low door. "Are you in here?"

Chapter Eight: Special Events

Zoe isn't in the burial chamber. It is much smaller than the anteroom, and there are no paintings on the rough walls or above the door that leads to the Hall of Judgment. The ceiling is scarcely higher than the door, and I have to hunch down to keep from scraping my head against it.

It is darker in here than in the anteroom, but even in the dimness I can see that Zoe isn't here. Neither is Tutankhamun's sarcophagus, carved with *The Book of the Dead.* There is nothing in the room at all, except for a pile of suitcases in the corner by the door to the Hall of Judgment.

It is our luggage. I recognize my battered Samsonite and the carry-on bags of the Japanese tour group. The flight attendants' navy-blue overnight cases are in front of the pile, strapped like victims to their wheeled carriers.

On top of my suitcase is a book, and I think, "It's the travel guide,"

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even though I know Zoe would never have left it behind, and I hurry over to pick it up.

It is not *Egypt Made Easy*. It is my *Death on the Nile*, lying open and face-down the way Lissa left it on the boat, but I pick it up anyway and open it to the last pages, searching for the place where Hercule Poirot explains all the strange things that have been happening, where he solves the mystery.

I cannot find it. I thumb back through the book, looking for a map. There is always a map in Agatha Christie, showing who had what stateroom on the ship, showing the stairways and the doors and the unimpressive rooms leading one into another, but I cannot find that either. The pages are covered with long unreadable columns of hieroglyphics.

I close the book. "There's no point in waiting for Zoe," I say, looking past the luggage at the door to the next room. It is lower than the one I came through, and dark beyond. "She's obviously gone on to the Hall of Judgment."

I walk over to the door, holding the book against my chest. There are stone steps leading down. I can see the top one in the dim light from the burial chamber. It is steep and very narrow.

I toy briefly with the idea that it will not be so bad after all, that I am dreading it like the clergyman, and it will turn out to be not judgment but someone I know, a smiling bishop in a white suit, and mercy is not a modern refinement after all.

"I have not murdered another," I say, and my voice does not echo. "I have not committed adultery."

I take hold of the doorjamb with one hand so I won't fall on the stairs. With the other I hold the book against me. "Get back, you evil ones," I say. "Stay away. I adjure you in the name of Osiris and Poirot. My spells protect me. I know the way."

I begin my descent. ●

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ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

Short Long Sun

Nightside the Long Sun
By Gene Wolfe
Tor, $21.95

Some chapters into Gene Wolfe's latest, *Nightside the Long Sun*, you realize that you are into the known territory of the unknown. This is not paradox; it simply describes a familiar opening gambit on the part of some authors. The social background is a theocracy. Attached to the religion are artifacts which we recognize as the product of science, but which all or most of the characters think of as supernatural. The world in which this is set has mysterious aspects, physical and/or social, the causes of which are revealed eventually.

In this case, the religion has temples and schools (manteons and palaestras) and priests and priestesses (Pateras and Mayteras); nine major deities (All-power Pas, his consort Echidna, Scylla with the head of a woman and the body of an octopus, et al.) as well as numerous minor deities mentioned in the Writings.

Now the puzzles are presented. Some of the population—including a major character who is a Maytera—seems to be android, robot, or cyborg. They are treated on an equal basis with "bio" men or women. In all the manteons as well as other locations, there are "windows" wherein the gods once appeared, but have not for many years. The horizon goes up, and also up are the "skylands" which contain forests, fields, and cities. (A clue! A clue! Are we *inside* something?) These are behind something called "the long sun," in front of which some sort of shade appears periodically to provide darkness. There is also a brief reference to a "short sun" which existed in the past. That's the sum total of environmental facts we're given.

As for the plot, it covers slightly over a day in the life of the young Patera Silk, whose manteon and paleastra have been sold out from under him by the ecclesiastical powers because they're not bringing in enough revenue. I must admit that at this point I could not help but think of Bing Crosby in *Going My Way* (the Barry Fitzgerald figure, Silk's mentor, the ancient Patera Pike, is recently dead). However, Father Bing never quite ran into the dizzying events that Silk does, as he decides to break into the estate of the wealthy man Blood who has bought the property to confront him in some way. This he succeeds in doing; needless to say, the estate is full of the usual intriguing Wolfe

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inventions, human and animal. In a bemusing *volte face*, Silk finds himself exorcising Blood's best bordello. It's a former manteon; Silk finds a window in which he actually converses with one of the goddesses. He returns to his manteon, saved for the moment, and hears his own voice emerging from it. "He opened the door . . . and stepped inside" is the conclusion of the novel.

So at the end of the book, the "long sun" and the other mysteries remained unexplained, though the reader can make some good guesses. In fact, the blurb on the bound galley I received proclaims the novel to be "a towering saga of life on a huge spaceship" which is more than you are told inside. (Also, there are hints of a connection to Urth of "The New Sun" cycle). Plotwise, also, you have only an incident, not even reaching a demiclimax. Now authors and publishers can publish whatever part of a novel or series they want to. I can but note that there *is* an inherent danger. Is the reader enough impressed by the fragmentary to want to continue? My advice is to wait for all the pieces to be published before starting this one.

Elizabethan Arthurian

Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon

By Lisa Goldstein
Tor, $19.95

On looking back on Lisa Goldstein's *Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon* after reading it, it occurs to me that the title reflects the novel rather well. It's intriguing and poetical, but even after you've finished the book, you're not sure what the title has to do with it. There's some ambiguity as to how the warring sides (see below) use dark and light ("darkness covering light" vs. "light shining through darkness"), but not that much is made of the sun *or* the moon, or strange devices, for that matter. And equally, the novel is intriguing and poetical, but after the fact you're not all that sure how it holds together.

In 1590, Elizabethan London suffers a secret invasion of the Faerie Folk from the countryside. They hold their revels on Finsbury Field just outside the city, where Oriana also holds court. (Their uneasiness at the city is suggested, but as to the practical matters of the move, nothing is revealed. One can't help but wonder if they all put up at inexpensive bed-and-breakfasts, or move into the grace and favor cottages at the Palace. Oh, well, that's quibbling.)

There are two other major factors in the story. One is Alice, a widowed bookseller who has set up a stall in the booksellers' area of the churchyard of St. Paul's. (One answer to the above question—a brownie takes up residence in her house.) The other is a gaggle of young poets and playwrights who sell their material to the booksellers, and who I, not being an expert on the minor late sixteenth century literati and poetasters, had a lot of trouble telling apart, since most of them seemed to be named Tom (or was it Robert?). One Shakes-something-or-other is mentioned in passing, but plays no part in the action—I did pin down their leading light, a young hothead named Christopher Marlowe,

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who is just having a great success with his play, *Dr. Faustus*.

All three of these factions are looking for something: Alice for her runaway son who is just a little bit fey; Kit Marlowe and various others, acting as spies for the Queen or other court factions, looking for a young loony who insists he is a king and is to be addressed as such; and the Faerie Folk looking for Queen Oriana's son, switched at birth with a mortal child to keep him safely disguised as a human.

Now it's obviously giving nothing away to reveal that all three factions are looking for the same person. (He is now a young man; his name is Arthur, from which just enough is made so that you know that it's significant). And they are all opposed by a rather nasty set of beings led by the Red King, about whom you are told almost nothing. Battle is joined twice by his unpleasant minions and those of Oriana, each culminating in a one-on-one by a pair of partisan dragons (of all things) who appear and disappear on cue.

The tripartite nature of the narrative plays against the novel. The sections dealing with the widow Alice, her problems both in making a go of her late husband's bookstall and suffering accusations of being a witch, and her encounters with the magic world, including her friend Margery (a real witch) and Oriana's people, hold the attention. But the intrigues and complications of the various young writers become confusing, and the Faerie Folk, though of inventive variety (brownies, horned men, twig folk, tiny winged creatures, et al.), curiously lack the glamour of real magic.

Mistdeeds

Mistworld

By Simon R. Green
Ace, $4.50 (paper)

Mistworld is an outlaw world and a world of outlaws, more or less pitted against an evil interstellar Empire. Its technology is crumbling due to lack of adequate supplies, though smugglers manage to bring in some necessities.

But it is primarily protected by a psionic shield created by linked espers, a usage which is extremely difficult and often fatal to those involved. The esper mutation is common enough through the Empire and the maverick worlds like Mistworld, and there are also enhanced (naturally and genetically) variations of esperkind that can be deadly.

Mistworld itself is a cold, barren bit of rock, covered with snow and breeding such charming things as Hob hounds, lethal creatures that kill for fun. The only city, Mistport, is constantly shrouded in cold mist (surprise)!

Simon R. Green's *Mistworld* is given enough of a valid science fictional basis to categorize it as such, but it has a definite fantasy feel to it, what with its thieves' quarter, quaint underworld taverns, cat burglars, and a miscellany of weaponry.

In the first few chapters, you meet a large cast of characters, among them: Cat, the mute cat burglar who starts things off with a daring robbery; Leon Vertue, the dealer in body parts who doesn't seem too squeamish about where

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he gets them; Blackjack, the professional mercenary; young Jamie Royal, gambler and operator on either side of the law; Topaz, the most powerful esper the Empire has produced, who escaped to Mistworld, and her husband Michael Gunn; Port Director Gideon Steele, who tries to keep Mistport's technological facilities going while squeezing a bit for himself; and the members of Mistworld's Council, a varied lot which includes Donald Royal, Jamie's grandfather.

None of these can be called the story's hero(ine) per se, and most of them are dead by the time the story is told; Green totes up a body count better than *Hamlet*'s as to the percentage of major characters. The plot spins mainly on Topaz's efforts to find the murderer of her husband, perpetrated in the chaos of a Hob hound attack, and Donald Royal's similar attempt to find those responsible for his grandson's death. The two are of course connected, along with a dastardly attempt against Mistworld by the Empire, using a secret weapon in the person of a mad esper.

As you can see, there's nothing all that new here, but Green moves his plot at top speed, and his characters are alive and his background solid.

Indiana Rex

Tyrannosaurus Rex

By J.F. Rivkin

Roc, $4.50 (paper)

"Mind the pterodactyl!"

"I never knew the Mayans had come this far into South America!"

"I say! Look over there. It's a *Triceratops* and a *Tyrannosaurus Rex* having a duel to the death!"

"How long have you been in this lost world, lunatic old man?"

"If we could just get one of those eggs back to civilization!"

Through a good part of *Age of Dinosaurs: Tyrannosaurus Rex* by J.F. Rivkin you well know where you are. You're back in the Golden Age of Boys' Adventure Books (girls apparently weren't interested in such esoteric, not to mention messy, things as dinosaurs) with all its wonderful, terrible ripoffs of Doyle and Burroughs.

An expedition in the 1920s finds deep in Brazil a Mayan temple (as for the remark above, I didn't know the Mayans had made it to South America at all—in all fairness, this is made clear later in the narrative). On top is a temple with crystal skulls placed in such a way they create a doorway to—somewhere. Pop, they're gone. Some return, raving of a land of monsters.

The old formula has some additions. Christine Fawcett, the granddaughter of the past expedition's leader, finds a fresh (relatively—at least not fossilized) Tyrannosaurus bone in the attic and not having anything else to do with her beauty, brains, and money, decides to mount an expedition to Brazil in search of dear old granddad. Luckily, her current bedmate, Tony Blondell, is late of her Majesty's Special Air Services and a Falklands veteran. What more can you ask for a jungle expedition? So a good deal of time is spent trekking through the jungle with Christine and Tony, who trade fairly witty repartee under the most horrendous circumstances.

Chris, on eating her first piranha: "It's rather like eating a hair-

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brush," on being attacked by a horde of leeches: "It looks like the welcome wagon has arrived,"; on the hatching of a baby *Tyrannosaurus:* "Looks like its mother, wouldn't you say. It has her mouth." (And of course the omnipresent "not in Kansas," line, overused lately). Tony tosses off like badinage, and suddenly you're seeing Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas, and realize you're in I. Jones clone country (which is, of course, a spinoff in turn from the aforementioned Boys' Adventure Books). Though the premise may be simplistic to the point of preposterousness, I had a good time despite myself.

Punny Capers

The Collected Feghoot

By Grendel Briarton
Pulphouse, $10 (paper)

Do you know the one about leaving no tern unstoned? If not, *The Collected Feghoot* by Grendel Briarton will be hard to explain. It consists of a collection of Feghoots, which appellation will do as well as any for a certain type of anecdote that consists of a short story that must lead up to (and end with) a dreadful pun based on a known saying or title. Within my experience, they began as an oral exercise, like so many jokes told from person to person. (The first one I remember was somewhere around mid-century and ended, "Rudolph, the Red, knows rain, dear.")

Then the form began to appear in print as the ongoing adventures of one Ferdinand Fèghoot as chronicled by one Grendel Briarton, whose identity is a loosely guarded secret. The science fictional milieu was particularly appropriate because at times you could stretch the vocabulary, personnel, or setting with a touch of the alien ("This happens to be one of those rays when everything goes dong!" can only be the product of a science fiction story.)

Now one's feelings about this kind of thing depend entirely on one's textual orientation; some will turn green and run, others will revel in them. I myself have been sharply taken to task by readers and writers for some of the subheads I have used over the years (I'm still fondest of "Alexander's Cross-Time Band" [not strictly a Feghoot, of course] on the review of a book about an alternate Macedonian conquest of the West, not the East) for which I take full responsibility. But for those who can stand this kind of thing, here are one hundred and twenty two collected groans.

Shoptalk

Thought for the month . . . in a recent collection of essays by the critic V.S. Pritchett, one insight struck me as being remarkably timely, though it was made about the wildly romantic novelist Ouida who "is not the first novelist to have delusions of grandeur . . . for when one is dealing in fantasy, it is not unnatural to help oneself."

Reprints, etc. . . . Here's a handy, dandy way to get three absolutely necessary novels for your collection on the cheap. Somebody had the bright idea of publishing *Frankenstein, Dracula,* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (by Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Robert Louis Stevenson, respectively, in case

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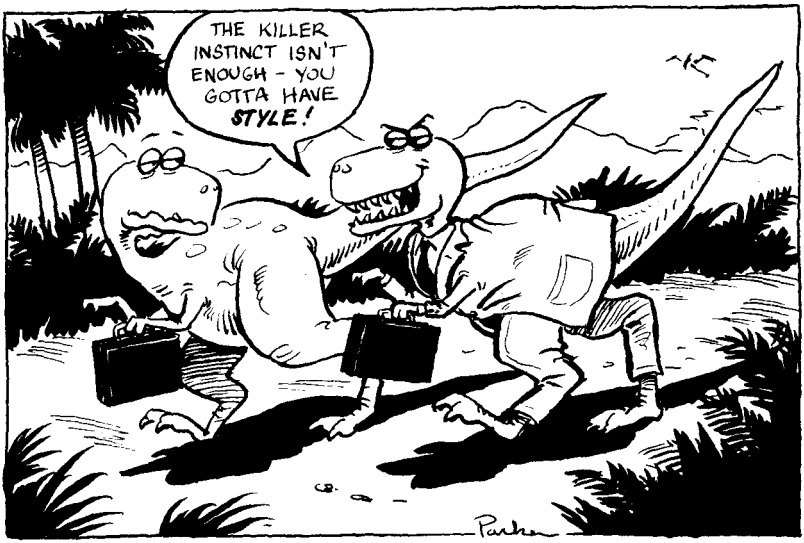
you didn't know) in one paperback volume (Signet, $5.95, paper). . . . I've felt that one of the most demanding things I've accomplished in my life is having read E.R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros* twice. Like so much of the fantasy from the early part of the century (Dunsany, Hodgson) written before the rules were set, it is unique. Now the three later and associated novels (which can't really be called sequels), *Mistress of Mistresses, A Fish Dinner in Memison*, and *The Mezantian Gate*, have been published in one volume. The last of the three has always been published in an incomplete form; included here is Eddison's first draft for the missing sections. Also there is chronology, various notes, a *dramatis personae*, genealogical tables and maps. Hats off to the publisher for bringing back these rare treats (Dell, $16, paper). . . . The more obscure novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs are being released a few at a time. (*The Lost Continent, The Cave Girl*, and *The Monster Men* are recent as I write.) There's no denying that his series (Barsoom, Pellucidar) were better than his solo novels, but these books are still jolly, old-fashioned pulp-adventure fun. Too bad the covers chosen for them can't reflect this, but I guess the theory is that if they *looked* old-fashioned, nobody would want to buy them. Going in the other direction, there are the superb covers that Michael Whelan did for the Barsoom series, modern in style but absolutely capturing the spirit of the series (Del Rey, $3.99, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, **1393 rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada.** ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

A number of SF and fantasy wargaming con(vention)s coming up, as the Spring con season starts. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When calling cons, give your name and reason for calling right off. When writing, send an SASE. Look for me behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

FEBRUARY 1993

5–7—**PsurrealCon.** For info, write: **Box 2069, Norman OK 73070.** Or phone: **(703) 273-3297** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect. Con will be held in: Oklahoma City OK (if city omitted, same as in address) Guests will include: None announced. Two to three hundred usually make this general SF/fantasy con.

5–7—**UK SF Folksinging Con. (0272) 737-418.** Weston-Super-Marc, England. Kathy Mar, James Rhodri.

5–7—**Winterfest. (800) 266-3111.** Travelodge, Victorville CA. Moxel/experimental rocket fly meet.

12–14—**VisionCon. (417) 863-1155.** Quality Inn North, Springfield MO. Media & gaming convention.

12–14—**CostumeCon. (412) 242-8837.** Sheraton Station Square, Pittsburgh PA. SF/fantasy costuming.

19–21—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701. (617) 625-2311.** Haldeman, Kidd, Meacham.

19–21—**SheVaCon, % Grimm, 2608 Marr St. NW, Roanoke VA 24012.** Staunton VA. Roger Zelazny.

19–21—**RadCon, %, Lincoln, 104 Comstock, Richland, WA 99352. (509) 943-0845.** Gaming & SF.

20—**Cabin Fever Fan Party, % StarBase KC, Box 11444, Kansas City MO 64112.** Star Trek mini-con.

20–21—**OzCon, Box A1359, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia.** Comic-book convention at the Sydney Hilton.

25–28—**ConTact, % Barr, 1412 Potomac Ave. SE, Washington, DC 20003. (202) 544-4984.** Palo Alto CA.

26–28—**Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. (714) 540-9884.** Burbank CA. Dr. Who. Levene.

26–28—**Total ConFusion, % Mark Dowdy, Box 1463, Worcester MA 01607. (508) 987-1530.** Gaming.

MARCH 1993

4–7—**World Horror Conv., Box 191, Stamford CT 06232. (615) 226-6172.** Straub, Daniels, Wiater.

5–7—**GrandCon, Box 9072, Wyoming MI 49509.** Grand Rapids MI. David Cherry, Mary Ellen Wessels.

5–7—**AstronomiCon, Box 1701, Rochester NY 14603. (716) 342-4697.** Michael Swanwick, Phil Foglio.

5–7—**WolfCon, Box 796, Wolfville NS B0P 1X0. (902) 835-6131 or 542-9306.** Medieval/media.

5–7—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. (608) 231-2324 or 251-6226 or 233-0326.** Feminism/SF.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2–6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1–5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 944-1998 (fax).** WorldCon. C$95/US$85.

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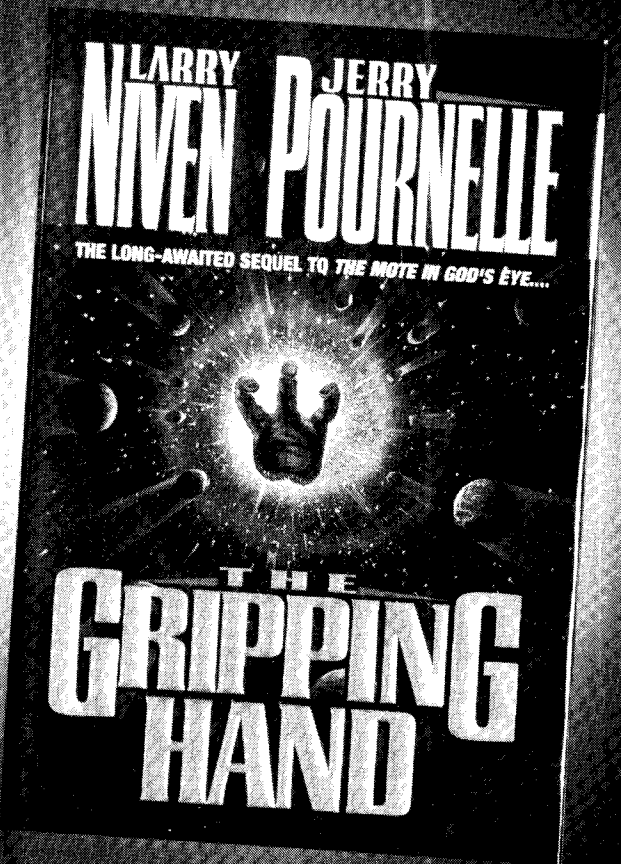

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